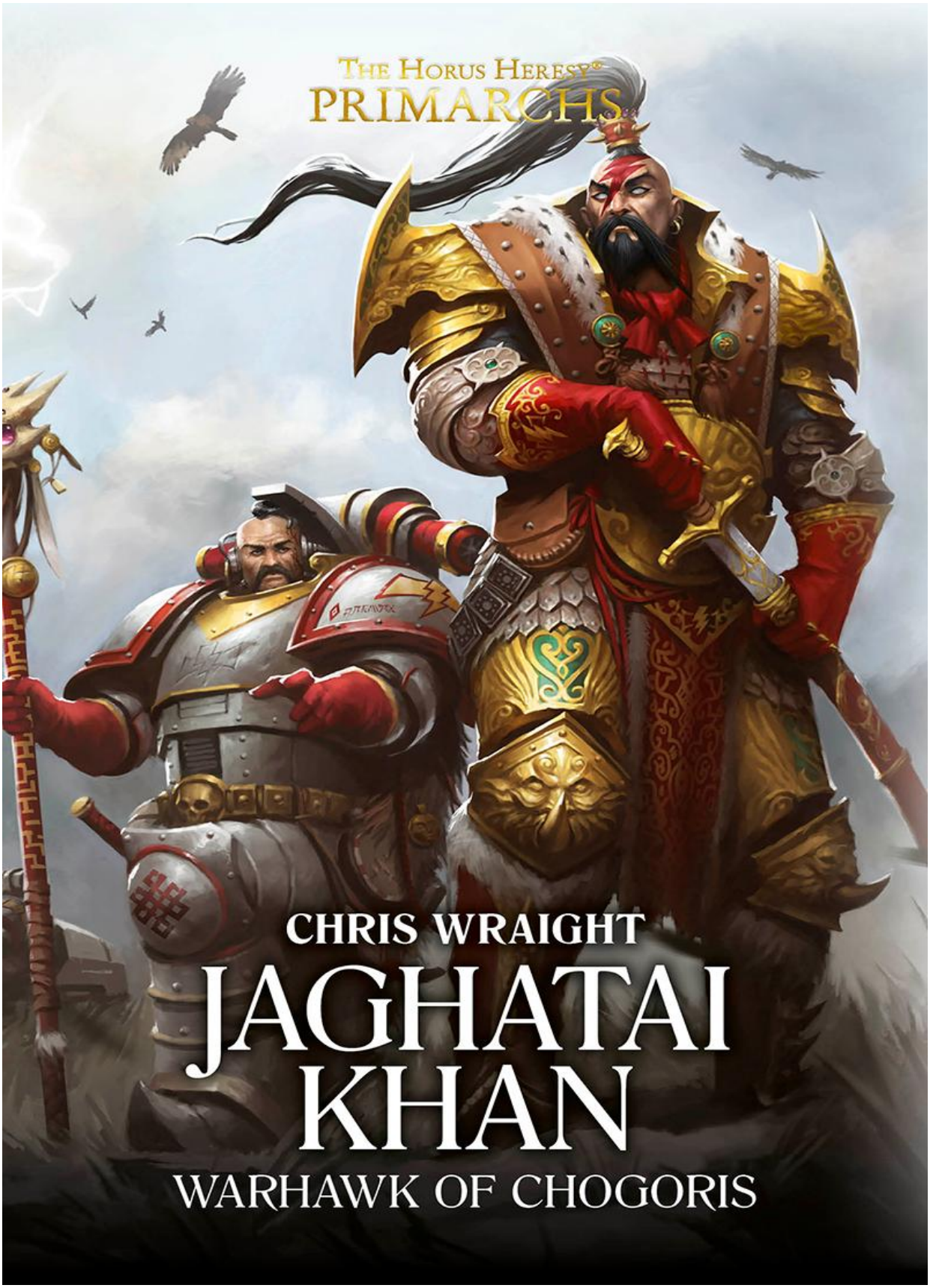
CHRIS WRAIGHT

JAGHATAI KHAN

WARHAWK OF CHOGORIS


THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS
CHRIS WRAIGHT
JAGHATAI KHAN
WARHAWK OF CHOGORIS

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LORGAR: BEARER OF THE WORD
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MAGNUS THE RED: MASTER OF PROSPERO
LEMAN RUSS: THE GREAT WOLF
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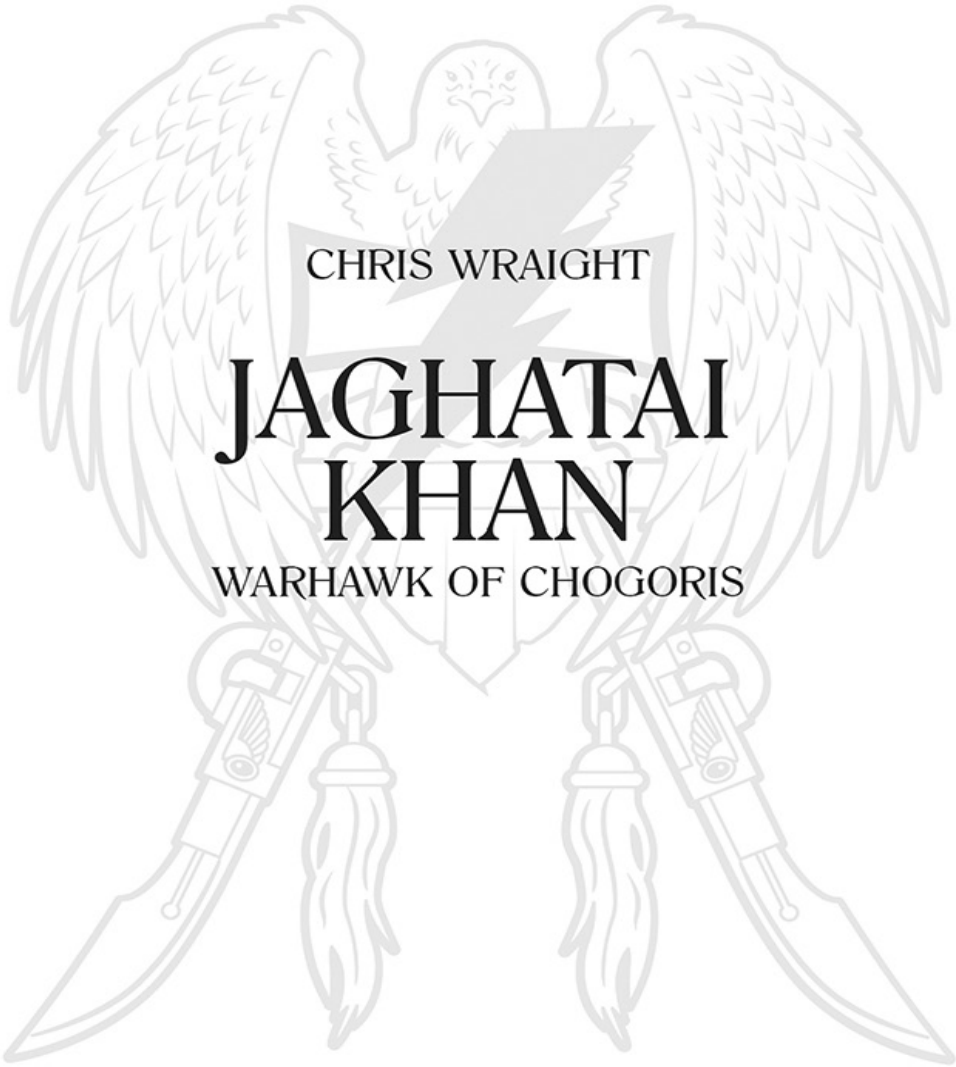
PRIMARCHS



CHRIS WRAIGHT

JAGHATAI KHAN

WARHAWK OF CHOGORIS

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons. Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor, as system after system is brought back under his control. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful champions.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superhuman beings who have led the Space Marine Legions in campaign after campaign. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation, while the Space Marines themselves are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Many are the tales told of these legendary beings. From the halls of the Imperial Palace on Terra to the outermost reaches of Ultima Segmentum, their deeds are known to be shaping the very future of the galaxy. But can such souls remain free of doubt and corruption forever? Or will the temptation of greater power prove too much for even the most loyal sons of the Emperor?

The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...

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With many thanks to Nick Kyme and Laurie Goulding
for their sterling editorial guidance.

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PREFACE

On Chogoris, a tale is told from the time before discord came.

A sage of Golden Terra made his life's work the study of the Eighteen. As each son of the Emperor was found, he travelled the stars to seek accounts of their deeds and nature. He collected testimony and submitted many scrolls to the Throneworld for safekeeping. Some of them are still there, they say. Some are lost. Such is the way of things.

It is said that this sage was sufficiently venerable that he had the ear of the Emperor Himself. One night, before the advent of strife, the two of them walked the Palace walls together. Birds sang – in those days, there were still birds alive on Golden Terra.

The Emperor, whose face was hidden by splendour, asked the sage how his work was progressing.

'Very well, my liege,' the sage replied, just as ever unable to look his master in the eye. 'I have created an archive for you, so that your achievement may be recognised for posterity – the Library of the Primarchs.'

The Emperor said nothing. On the few occasions when they had spoken together, the sage had rarely known what the Emperor thought, or even if He were truly listening at all. In this, he was not alone, for the thoughts of the Emperor were beyond the thoughts of all mortals.

'It will be a valuable addition, I hope,' the sage went on, feeling the need to fill the silence with words. 'Except that it has been easier to study some of your sons than others.'

Still the Emperor said nothing.

'I do not pretend to understand your plans fully,' the sage said, 'and I do not presume to question the nature of those, such as the Lord of the Red Sands, into whom enquiry has been challenging. They are all so different –

that, I suppose, is the genius of them. Each has his nature. Each has his gift.'

The Emperor stopped walking. He looked up into the starry heavens – in those days, the skies of Golden Terra still had stars.

'But then there is the Warhawk,' said the sage, shaking his head. 'The Great Khan of the Fifth. Of all of them, I have never come close to him. Whatever his gift is, I remain ignorant of it.'

It is here that accounts diverge. Some say that the Emperor smiled; others say that the Emperor never smiled. Still others maintain that the Emperor had no human features at all, but was like the light of the sun at noon in an empty sky.

'You wish to know what gift Jaghatai possesses,' the Emperor said.

'Yes, my liege,' said the sage. 'Very much. But nothing is known. Nothing is settled. His entry in the library will be slender, and even that will be supposition and hearsay. Sometimes I wonder if he is real at all, or just the rumour of a savage people. With him, with this Great Khan, there is only confusion.'

The Emperor began to walk again.

'There is your answer,' He said.

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ONE

The door shivered, its onyx panels already cracked and its carved jambs cracking. A storm blew through it, a roar of gold and white, as elemental as the summer gales on the Altak. A window pane shattered, sending teardrops of glass bouncing.

Courtiers scattered, hitching up heavy brocade robes and tottering like birds. A woman screamed, while a man stumbled and scrabbled on all fours towards the stairwell.

The storm paid them no heed. He strode through the crowd, eyes bright with a vital anger, towering over even the greatest and making them appear insignificant. In his wake came two armoured giants, clad in ivory and jasper, their heavy tread resounding on hard floors. All three titans glittered under the wheeling light of disturbed suspensors that set their scabbards and blade-pommels flashing.

‘His neck,’ said the Khagan of Chogoris, the Great Khan of the Fifth Legion Astartes, his long black hair flying loose. ‘If He does not learn to bend it, one day it will break.’

The primarch swept through the antechambers of the Imperial Palace, his cloak hem snapping like a whip about his heels. With him came the twin masters of his young army, Hasik and Giyahun, their bronze faces impassive.

Gold pillars soared up around them, chased and fluted and spiralled, inlaid with glass and studded with pearls. Marble statuary stood in blank isolation amid the mirrors and the porcelain, barred by the warm light of the Terran dawn.

A man in the robes of the Senatorum Imperialis emerged at the far end of the long gallery, took one look at the rampaging primarch, then darted out again. Other courtiers shrank back, bowing and stammering.

‘The mind – unequalled,’ the Khan growled, swinging into another hall. His closed fist punched out at a bulbous vase, and it shattered into a rain of echoing fragments. ‘But the neck. That is the weakness. That is the flaw.’

High windows passed by, leaded and mullioned, each offering glimpses of the immensity beyond – parapets rearing above parapets, glare-white from the mountain air. The Palace was a never-ending project, they said, a billion techwrights working on it daily to render the peaks into cathedrals of the mind and the soul, raising up monuments to Unity that would endure for eternity. No guns marred the ramparts in those days, only pennants and propaganda, for war had left Terran skies a lifetime ago and now burned its way across the vaults of a deeper heaven.

‘He gazes on the infinite,’ the Khan spat, ‘but we are body, blood and bone.’

His retinue made no reply. They did not as much as glance at the finery around them; their eyes were fixed forwards, their sun-darkened faces held rigid. Both carried a long scar on their cheeks, zigzagged in ritual imitation of lightning, the kindler-destroyer of the borderless grass. Both understood that they were not being addressed. This was their master in his anger, unleashing the torrent as a mountain unleashes its storms.

‘Scorn not your tools, say the sages,’ the Khan said. ‘Scorn not the blade that cuts, lest it open your own veins.’

Another hall beckoned, another chamber within that cavernous interior, just as ornate, just as immaculate. Jewelled incense-drones swerved out of the primarch’s path, whining as their grav-plates struggled to gain loft.

The Khan halted at last. More than thirty figures barred the way ahead. Some were armoured as he was, arrayed in a variety of Crusade-pattern war-plate. Others wore the uniforms of the Imperial Army – stiff jerkins, high collars, flak-weave half cloaks. A scattering of them were wrapped in the long robes of officials.

Jaghatai Khan glared at them hungrily, as if poised to attack. His great fist, locked within an ivory gauntlet, flexed instinctively. The delegation shrank back; it was never easy to look a primarch in the eye, no matter one’s rank or training, and it was almost impossible to face an angry one.

‘Who dares this now?’ the Khan demanded.

Most did not speak. Some looked as if they had lost the capacity. Only one managed to return that gaze, and did so uneasily, as if he feared attracting the storm’s full wrath.

‘May it please you, lord,’ he started, ‘the ship is ready.’

The man was heavily built, old but not decrepit. His skin was lined, his muscle tone rigid, and he wore the dress uniform of an admiral in the Naval high command. In ordinary circumstances, he would have been a man of substance, one from whom many would take an order without question. Perhaps he had commanded many starships, and seen many worlds wreathed in the coronas of battle. Yet right then, just then, as he looked up into the face of one of the Emperor’s sons, he might as well have been a youth of sixteen on his first assignment.

The Khan rounded on him. ‘What ship?’

‘The one ordained for you.’

‘Without my knowledge.’ The Khan shot a sour smile at Hasik. ‘It’d better be a good one.’

The admiral swallowed. ‘The best, lord. The very best. A Gloriana.’

‘Those words mean nothing to me.’

‘Perhaps, then…’ The admiral’s eyes fell away. ‘Perhaps it would be better to see it, then.’

As soon as the words left his lips, he went white. He took an involuntary step backwards, flinching as if in anticipation of a blow.

The Khan stared at him. The air seemed to fizz a little, as if energy were coiling somewhere. The light around them thickened, and the ivory gauntlet clenched into a fist.

Then the primarch laughed. He looked over at Giyahun, who grinned back.

‘He thinks I’ll skin him alive,’ the Khan said, speaking to his gene-son in Khorchin, the kin-speech of the Talskar of Chogoris.

‘Give the order, Khagan. My knife grows blunt in this shit shed.’

‘Ha. We’re guests, and my Father objects to blood on his fine floors.’ The Khan looked back at the admiral. ‘I was told I had an army,’ he said, reverting back to thickly accented Gothic.

Another official stepped forwards then, a portly woman with a severe bob and jowly cheeks. ‘Ready for inspection, lord.’

‘I was told I had counsellors.’

A third shuffled into view, a thin man with an augmetic jawline and receding hair. ‘Whenever you wish to consult us, lord.’

Hasik raised an eyebrow. ‘Never been given an army before,’ he said in Khorchin. ‘Always had to take them.’

The Khan shot him a dry look. ‘No man gives a gift without expecting another in return. We didn’t come here with our hands full.’

‘As they never cease to make clear.’

The primarch turned back to the first speaker. ‘Where is it, then?’ he asked. For all his imposing demeanour, there was something in that question – an eagerness, only part suppressed by awareness of rank, as if he had been shown some ancient blade only offered to the sons of princes.

‘Void-dock above Luna, lord,’ the admiral replied. ‘Ready for examination whenever you deem fit.’

The Khan scrutinised him a little longer. ‘Who sent you here? Malcador? My Father? You know I come from Him now? You know what we talked of?’ He waved the stuttering answer away. ‘No matter. Take me there – I need to fill my lungs with purer air.’ He glanced back at Hasik. ‘You, go and see this army. See if it’ll fight, or if it’s as slack-gutted as everything else in this place.’

He gestured for Giyahun to follow him, then paused.

‘Where’s Yesugei?’ he asked.

‘Exploring,’ ventured Giyahun, shrugging.

The Khan looked amused. ‘One day that’ll get him into trouble.’ He summoned the admiral with a snap of his fingers. ‘Come. Show me this ship you’re so proud of. It had better be worth the journey.’

He stood in the chamber, chin raised, looking through the slender window. On the far side of the glass, a bird hopped across the stone sill. He watched it silently. The bird’s head turned, angling a jewelled eye towards him. For a moment, they stared at one another.

Then a door creaked, tripping an announcement chime, and the creature fluttered away in a snap of feathers.

He watched it go, before turning to see who had entered.

A woman stood in the doorway. She was tall, her face angular. She wore deep green robes and bore the stylised I-icon of the Imperium atop a long metal staff.

‘My apologies,’ she said. ‘Am I disturbing you?’

He bowed. ‘Not at all.’ He beckoned her in. ‘Come.’

Only when she stepped under the light of the lumens was it apparent how tall she was. Most humans looked like children beside one of the Legiones Astartes, but she didn’t. Perhaps that was due to her physical presence; perhaps something else.

‘I was told you’d found your way here,’ she said, looking around the chamber. ‘Not many come this far up.’

The walls around them were decayed, a mottled stone that had aged and rotted. Packing crates lay about the floor, most filled with old machinery. A defunct cogitator stood in the shadows, its data-maw empty and gaping. The window looked out over far newer reaches of the Palace, all coronets of gold and silver, sharp-edged against the eye-watering dazzle from the mountains.

‘Old, this place,’ he said, smiling apologetically. ‘Like me. Too old, they said.’

The woman leaned against the wall opposite him. ‘For induction into the Legions? It depends. Sometimes the seed takes, sometimes it doesn’t. Your Legion took a surprising number of post-adolescents. I wonder why?’

‘Forgive,’ he said, clasping his hands together in gesture of politeness. ‘Who are you?’

‘Magister Niasta. The office of the Sigillite. I was asked to make myself known to you. That proved harder than anticipated – you don’t stick to your itineraries. None of you do.’

He bowed. ‘Is true. I am–’

‘I know who you are.’ She looked at him carefully, a half-smile playing on her lips. ‘Tell me if I pronounce it right – *zadyin arga,* Targutai Yesugei.’

‘Excellent. You speak Khorchin. If we may?’

‘Afraid not. I know those two words, nothing else. They tell me it’s damned hard to learn.’

Yesugei gave a rueful smile. ‘And other way round. Will take time.’

‘The lexicographers will have the syntax decoded in a month. Then at least we’ll be able to use transcoder beads. Until then, it’s fumbling and stumbling.’

‘Fumbling and stumbling,’ Yesugei repeated, liking the sound of the words. ‘Yes, all of us.’

‘The rest, maybe. You, not so much.’ She ran her finger absent-mindedly up the length of the staff, right under the iron symbol of Malcador’s office. ‘You have an interesting mind, Targutai Yesugei. I sensed it when your delegation arrived, and now I’m standing close to you, I feel it more strongly. You know what I mean, I think.’

He smiled. Like all his kin, when he smiled his whole face creased. ‘Weather-magic,’ he said. ‘They told us it causes trouble.’

‘Weather-magic? How quaint. I’ve seen reports of what you can do with it. I think you’d better come up with a better name.’

‘Suits us.’

‘But it’s dangerous, this business.’ She looked at him more seriously. ‘That’s why we brought you here. Well, it’s one of many reasons, but an important one. You don’t hide it. You don’t seem to feel the need. I could admire that, but you’ll need to learn to.’

Yesugei looked at her quizzically.

‘Your master is the fifteenth primarch to be located,’ Niasta said. ‘His brothers were all brought here, just as he has been, and inducted into the ways of the Crusade. I saw them all come, one by one, ushered into the Palace and cloistered with the Emperor. Then I saw them go again, out into the void, where they now forge the Imperium at the head of the mightiest armies ever created. Each one of them would be a monarch on his own if allowed to be, an emperor greater than any that’s gone before, and yet they fight not for themselves, but for a greater vision. *His* vision.’

Yesugei nodded. ‘Is understood.’

‘Then you understand the danger. It is Unity. It is conformity. It has inherent vice. They must learn, all of them, and they must trust. So many of them find that difficult. How could they not? Even I struggle with it, and I’m not tempted by your outrageous martial prowess.’

‘This, also, is understood.’

Niasta laughed. ‘So you know what’s coming. The Khan has spoken with his Father often since we brought you to Terra, and we know it’s not gone well. This is not uncommon, but we need it to go better.’

Yesugei sighed, and looked out of the window again. ‘Tell him, then. I am not master – he is.’

‘This is our message – there are no gods, there is no magic, there is only reason. This is our only weapon, the one sanctioned by Him, beloved of all, who set this thing in motion.’

‘Is nonsense.’

Niasta smiled tolerantly. ‘Which is, I gather, exactly what the Khan told the Emperor. And that’s what’s giving my master considerable trouble, and when our respective masters are at loggerheads, it falls to us to smooth things over.’

‘Logger heads?’

‘You know precisely what I mean.’

Yesugei smiled sadly, knowingly. ‘You wish us to lie.’

‘We wish you to be sensible.’

‘He will never lie.’ Yesugei lost his smile. ‘He has fault. All men have fault. But not this. He make an oath, the oath is kept. You understand?’

‘This is not about truth,’ Niasta said, just a trace of exasperation creeping into her polished voice. ‘It doesn’t need to be.’

Yesugei pursed his cracked lips. The ritual tattoos flexed as his skin moved, forming new and esoteric shapes across sun-toughened flesh. ‘We are warriors. We have weapon, we use it. Does not master us, we master it. That is balance.’

‘He needs to meet the Sigillite,’ Niasta said. ‘He needs to meet Malcador.’

Yesugei shrugged. ‘May not be possible.’

‘Make it possible.’

He turned to face her, looking at her carefully for the first time. ‘Your eyes,’ he said. ‘What happened?’

Niasta looked away. ‘Soul-binding,’ she said. ‘Most lose them.’

‘Soul-binding,’ Yesugei mused, softly. ‘So there are souls, then.’

‘Do not be obtuse.’

‘Be honest, with me. You have sight, both kinds. What is inner sense used for?’

‘I am not used. I serve.’

‘Now, yes. The future – who knows?’ He drew closer, and his golden eyes reflected the light from the window. ‘What you sense in me, Niasta, I sense in you. But be careful. We do not lie, even to ourselves. Perhaps you do.’

‘Get him to meet Malcador. That’s all I need.’

Yesugei hesitated, as if he wanted to say more. Then he thought better of it and turned away, back to the window.

‘I do what I can,’ he said.

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TWO

Giyahun looked out of the viewport as the shuttle pulled clear of the lower orbital zones. Until a year ago, his feet had never left the ground unless mounted, which wasn't much different, as Chogorian equines were not large. His world had been that of a single sun, hard wind on his limbs and the soft rush of a grassland that had no limits. The sky had been for him, as it was for all his kin, the arch of heaven, the altar of devotion and the arbiter of battle-fate, a barrier none could pass in life.

Once, a long time ago by any mortal standards, he had ridden at the head of a raiding party along the ridge of high ground the Nan people called the Anshu Shoulder. As the sun had been setting, he had pulled up along the edge, where the terrain fell in sheer terraces down to the gaping emptiness below. That had been his first sight of the Altak, the plains that ran across half the planet, unbroken by mountain or wall, home only to the restless confederations of mobile nations with their herds, their hide tents, their hunt-trails and their endless vendettas.

There he had paused, sat back on the spine of his *aduu* mount, the sweat rising from both their hot flanks. There he had watched the gold-red ember of the sun sink towards the emptiness, turning the grass into a lake of fire. And there he had thought to himself: *This is all there is. This is the bow-curve of the world. If a man can conquer this, he has conquered creation.*

He smiled at the memory. That was so long ago. He had gone from a warrior of the Nan, to a warrior of the Khitan, to a warrior of the *ordu* of Jaghatai. The Khagan had never been a vengeful overlord – he had always folded defeated armies into his own, gathering up the warring factions of the plains one by one until their numbers swelled beyond counting. Ancient bad blood was drained away quickly – all the Khagan cared about was whether you could wield a tulwar, could handle your mount, would follow

an order and would stand your ground when the enemy turned to face you. In time, that was all the previously feuding clans cared about too.

That was why Jaghatai was loved with that fierce, uncompromising love that Chogorians reserved only for sworn blood brothers. He had exalted them. He had ridden beside his sons for many years, enduring what they endured, suffering what they suffered, passing from wild rumour into legend. He was the lord of the plains, the *berkut*, the khan of all khans.

And yet, even when every wall had been demolished, every palace ransacked and all empires lain waste, even then did the boundaries of experience retreat a little further.

Giyahun had been wrong. There was more, far more, to conquer than the Altak. There were other worlds, a million of them, each as unlike one another as the piebald flesh of the herds – some were bathed in flame, others gripped by the iron vice of primordial cold; some were literally beyond understanding.

It could turn the mind, if you thought about it too hard. His kind had all been raised in a world of limited truths, resource-scarce and spare. Now there was an infinity of experience to absorb. It was, as the old zadyin arga Hogal had said before the attempt at ascension had killed him, a hard drink to gulp down.

The shuttle shook as the drives shifted into a higher register. The grey-gold sweep of Terra's face was long gone, melting back into a shrinking orb, stealing away all that madness and clamour. The Palace already seemed like some bizarre waking dream, a phantasm sent by sorcerers.

Giyahun turned to look at his master. The Khan sat back in a clamshell seat, outsized within its legionary-dimensioned frame, his long limbs spilling out. His lean face was pensive. His fingers played restlessly on the hilt of his great blade, snagging at the leather-wound grip as if he might pick it apart.

'You cannot tell me what He said to you?' Giyahun ventured.

The Khan looked up at him, roused from his thoughts, then smiled grimly.

'I'm still trying to decide,' he said. 'It's hard, with Him, to know. Hard even to look at Him.'

The Khan ran his hand over his face, rubbing at the scar that ran down his left cheek.

‘He’s done this fourteen times before,’ he said. ‘When my brother Horus was returned, there were festivals here for a month, they told me. Now they barely notice another one arriving. And yet, for us…’ He shook his head. ‘A year ago, all you could do was hang off a mount and build a fire from its dung. Now look at you.’

Giyahun chuckled.

‘I should admire Him more, I know,’ the Khan said, pensively. ‘I should be able to see what it is that makes them love Him.’

‘Safety,’ offered Giyahun, shrugging.

‘*Aya*, we should be aiming for more than that.’ The Khan stretched his arms out – huge arms, encased in the new battleplate wrought for him on Luna by the finest armourers in the galaxy. ‘I wish to meet my brothers now, Giyahun. My curiosity burns. I wish to see if they’re all as bloodless as these parchment eaters here, or if they have some spine lodged in their backs.’

Giyahun didn’t reply. He had no concept of what another primarch would be like, and nor did he care. One was enough.

‘We need the means to roam again,’ the Khan said, sitting forwards and looking out of the main viewport. ‘That, at least, is something these people can do for us.’

They were drawing closer. Giyahun turned, following the Khan’s gaze, and saw the first of Luna’s great void-docks swelling up out of the darkness. Cradled within it, festooned with the flicker of electro-welders, was a starship. It was spare and rangy like its presumptive master, a spear-prowed monster. The enginarium was open, flayed and displaying its internal organs – a vast conglomeration of plasma chambers and powerlines. Even as they watched, Mechanicum-red haulers deposited another heavy component, turning it silently and slowly in the frozen void.

The Khan stared at it. A kind of possessiveness lit his features. He looked at the starship like he were looking at a prize stallion, or at a guarded citadel ripe for the taking.

‘Now this is something I could make use of,’ he murmured softly. ‘I wonder what they call it?’

‘Star Hunters,’ said Hasik, enunciating the words uneasily.

He had known the name ever since the Khagan had come back from his first meeting with the Emperor, back when they were all still in shock and it felt as if the world were cracking open under their feet. In the months that

had followed, the name had loomed ever larger, made into actuality by the warriors in grey who had made their way to Chogoris to pay homage to their new master. He remembered the first time he had laid eyes on one of them – impossibly tall, impossibly bulky and clad in armour that made his own leather and silk battle-garb look hopelessly fragile.

In truth, Hasik was a Star Hunter now too. He had survived those hellish rites, accelerated into a single year of intensive surgery, and now wore the heavy overlapping plate armour of the Imperium, just as they did. The lacquered faces of his plate were the same pale grey, marked with the angular Legion ‘V’ and festooned with tactical designators he barely understood. Every piece of livery had come from another world, solidified over eighty years of constant campaigning.

It was still a strange notion. This army had been fighting without its general for a human lifetime, accumulating doctrines and battle honours on its own, rampaging across the galaxy like some headless beast with its own purposes, idiosyncrasies and hungers.

In theory, Hasik was now one of its two senior commanders. In practice, he barely knew how to address those in the ranks, overwhelmingly drawn as they were from regions of Terra he could scarcely pronounce, let alone understand.

Now he surveyed them. Their helms glinted under sunlit skies, ranked across a wide parade ground within the Palace confines. There must have been several hundred assembled there, the kind of formation he would have commanded on Chogoris as a *minghan*, but which here went by other names. Great vehicles sat idling on the edges of the ground: tracked personnel carriers, ground attack bikes, grav-flyers with underslung projectile weapons.

The unit was well equipped. He understood more about the machinery than he did about those who controlled it. Since his ascension, his mind worked faster than it had once done, and facility with arms came naturally. He had learned to pilot the grav-flyers as expertly as he had once ridden a living mount. He had learned to aim the bolters and duel with the energy-wreathed blades. He understood that the Star Hunters were a mechanised Legion, one to whom machines had been supplied in abundance, charged with providing first-strike expertise to a Crusade warfront that was endlessly expanding. Some of this he appreciated. Other things were still bewildering.

Not that he could show that now. Hundreds of eyes were on him, hidden behind helm-lenses but fixed on him nonetheless, scrutinising him just as he studied them. They would need to see only strength, or he would never gain their respect. Some things were a mystery to Hasik, but after a lifetime leading men against the lost empires of Chogoris, that at least was not.

‘Tell me again,’ he said to his adjutant.

The company commander, who went helmless just as Hasik did, nodded. ‘The Fourth Company of the Third Chapter, recently returned from active service on the Hovian Perimeter. The first to be recalled to Terra for assimilation into the new command. Other units are in the void, and much of the rest of the Legion is still beyond contact range.’

‘And your name,’ said Hasik. It was hard to converse in Gothic all the time, to recall the endless tide of details and absorb what they meant. His mind had become so acute in so many ways, but something about Terran idioms always resisted assimilation. They were alien ways still, fitting uneasily into souls attuned to another world.

‘Namaz,’ replied the company commander.

‘Namaz,’ repeated Hasik slowly.

He walked up to the front rank of the assembled company. They waited in perfect, rigid silence. Their armour looked heavy under that clear sunlight. Hasik paused before a warrior bearing a serpent motif on his shoulder guard. He might have been told what that signified, or he might not – it was hard to remember.

For a moment they stood facing one another, Terran and Chogorian, a metre apart. Hasik was a few centimetres shorter, but there was otherwise little to differentiate between them.

When Hasik moved, the speed was blistering – his clenched fist flew whistling towards the warrior’s faceplate. The Terran reacted equally quickly, catching it in his palm. They pushed against one another for a moment, piling complementary pressure, bringing to bear that astonishing combination of gene-wrought muscle and techno-mechanical augmentation.

Then Hasik released, laughing. ‘Good,’ he said. The Terran remained silent. ‘Do not take a strike from anyone. Not even me.’

He lifted his head, looking out over the ranks.

‘He will change you, though,’ he called out, and his accented voice sounded strange on the skirling Terran wind. ‘He changed us, so do not stand against it. When he lifts his blade, keep yours down. He is the

Khagan, the conqueror of conquerors, and you will be his blood-kin. All are taken, all may serve.'

As he spoke, the words began to come. Perhaps declaiming Gothic was easier than attempting to use it subtly. Perhaps it was a language made for command, rather than more fluid forms of expression.

And they were listening. Sceptically, perhaps, but they absorbed the words readily enough.

'Until now you were no man's servant save the Emperor in this place,' Hasik said. 'Soon you will be the Khan's army, the *ordu na Jaghatai*. You will learn a new way of war. We will teach it to you. Embrace it, you become greater. Scorn it, you will be trodden under his feet.'

They listened, but there was no way of knowing if they had truly taken it in. They were like automata, perfectly drilled and soulless. They might have found the words uplifting. More likely they found it insulting – these things would take time.

Hasik turned to Namaz. He felt a certain heaviness on his soul. This was just the start.

'Begin your drills now,' he ordered. 'Let us see what we have to work with.'

The starship was a conurbation, bounded and bordered by the metallic sweeps of docking tethers and surrounded by clouds of welder-drones. Most of the decks were exposed to the void, yet to be cocooned in the heavy ablative plates that would keep them secure from all but the very mightiest void weapons. Constructor-servitors floated amid the lattices of steel, bumping up against half-completed bulkheads before applying their payloads. Spider-legged priests of Mars scuttled across the yawning cavities, shunting binaric commands to one another as they assessed and gauged and commanded.

It had taken them two hours to pilot the shuttle from stern to prow, threading along the precipices and chambers amid a shimmering corona of energy flares. Their Terran hosts had gone at a leisurely pace, showing off everything they could. The official from the Palace, now revealed as Ert Ech Slavomar, Major-General of the First Division, Corps Logisticae, was clearly proud of what had been accomplished.

'Perhaps the finest one yet,' he said, leaning closer to the real-viewer. 'We've had time to perfect the pattern. There's a reason, my lord, why they're called Gloriana.'

Giyahun scratched at his cheek. He was getting hungry.

The shuttle pivoted on an invisible axis and began to climb, gliding past row after row of semi-completed decks. At times a long avenue would open up, giving a glimpse into the vessel's structural heart. The complexity was formidable.

The Khan observed it all. He said nothing, but his eyes, sunk deep within his drawn face, took everything in. Giyahun knew better than to speak to him when he was in such a mood. The primarch was studying the ship just as he studied every weapon he possessed – searching for weakness, appraising it for strength, considering where it might be employed.

'These sections are within a few weeks of being finished,' Slavomar announced as the shuttle rose up through a circular opening, exposing the spars of a great hall standing like ribs against the starry void. 'In time this will be your strategium, lord. And above that, the command bridge itself.'

The Khan leant forwards in his seat, placing rangy elbows on his knees. A greater chamber slowly swam into view, domed with armourglass and studded with concentric pillar rings. Mechanicum lifters were pirouetting over the centreline, many hauling cogitator cores ripe for depositing into the pits below. There must have been thousands of menials labouring within this single space, most vaguely humanoid, but others bearing the arcane ironwork improvements of the Red Planet.

The shuttle's deck shuddered, as if they had been buffeted by an atmospheric disturbance, and the viewscreens briefly crackled with static.

'A temporary oxygen-gravity blister,' Slavomar explained. 'To allow a closer look. Will you be pleased to descend, lord?'

The Khan grunted assent, still studying the superstructure around them, peering at the beams and skeletal bracings like a priest pulling apart the flesh of an augur sacrifice.

The shuttle pulled down towards the floodlit deck level, now swathed in a trembling teardrop of breathable air maintained at a survivable temperature and with the worst of the background radiation filtered out. Its legs extended and clouds of steam spilled over the matte-grey plates below.

Waiting at the bottom of the unfurling ramp was a delegation from the Mechanicum. A phalanx of twenty skitarii Protectors bearing long weapon staves accompanied a limping magos dominus clad in crimson livery. The magos was a crab-like slitherer with a distended and ribbed thorax,

overhung with a gaggle of knife-thin mechadendrites. Beside him was a humanoid figure in steel grey, her face a smooth mirrored mask.

The Khan descended from the shuttle, followed by Giyahun and the Terran entourage. His long hair lifted from his shoulders in the low gravity, and the steel-faced woman bowed before him.

‘Be welcome here, Fifth Iteration of the Omnissiah’s Will,’ she intoned. ‘I am the intermediary of Galithium Vo-Phoex, creator of this vessel.’

The Khan looked down at the creature, not bothering to hide his distaste. Chogoris was a world of few machines, and since discovering the Imperium, little had been more unnerving to the Chogorians than realising the extent to which variant strains of humanity permitted themselves to be enfolded within the chuntering sarcophagi of ironwork devices.

‘You made this?’ the primarch asked.

‘Galithium Vo-Phoex and his priests. And his manufactoria. It is no small endeavour – close to five per cent of the entire output of Sacred Mars may be consumed by the creation of a Gloriana war vessel for the duration of its construction.’

The magos inclined what passed for its head, and long trails of binaric indicators on rolls of parchment wobbled.

‘We trust,’ said the steel woman, ‘that you appreciate its capabilities.’

Only then did the Khan turn to her. ‘What is your name?’

‘It does not matter, lord.’

‘Tell me your name.’

‘I no longer have one.’

The Khan exhaled wearily. ‘You people.’

‘Lord?’

The Khan turned to Giyahun. ‘Impressed, *noyan-khan*?’ he asked.

Giyahun shrugged. ‘I only see its bones.’

‘I also.’ He looked the steel woman in what passed for her eyes. ‘We’re savages, you understand. A year ago, none of us had seen a combustion engine. Forgive us.’

The intermediary bowed, and her smooth face modified into a human-proximate smile gesture. ‘There is nothing to forgive, lord.’

‘Oh, but there is,’ said the Khan. He turned away from her, and addressed the magos directly. ‘Because you’re going to remake this one. You’re going to rip out that drivetrain and put in a new one. I’m going to show you what I need, and you’re going to do it all within a standard year.’

The magos' mandibles withdrew, clawing back to its body-husk. The intermediary tried to interject, but was ignored.

'What was the purpose of this fly-through?' the Khan asked. 'To awe us? *Fyah*, you iron slug, it takes more than that. Gut an empire from the gizzard to the neck, then come to me and treat as an equal. I've learned fast since my Father pulled me from the grass, and what you show me makes my stomach turn. You've done this a dozen times, and think that this horse-tamer will roll over and lap up your warmed-up designs like a grateful cur. No. No, he won't. Now listen.'

The Khan drew closer, and the magos visibly shrank back. Giyahun watched calmly, enjoying the spectacle.

'I want double the plasma capacity on those primary manifolds. I want the boost lines shortened. I don't give an aduu's shit for warp drives, for they are the matter of dreams and mumbling, but I want speed from my real-space engines. I want this thing to boost from nothing to full burn in the time it takes for one of my chosen to draw their curved blade. Noyan-khan.'

Giyahun pulled his tulwar from its scabbard and slashed it in towards the intermediary's neck, catching her off guard and making her freeze with the killing edge lodged a millimetre under her chin.

'*That* fast,' said the Khan, never looking anywhere else but into the multiple eyes of the magos. 'I want to be moving before my enemies have even given thought to my intentions. I want to be moving before the gods themselves have registered my presence in the heavens. You will do all this, you will remake this vessel, and you will do it perfectly within twelve of these Lunar months.'

The magos flustered.

'But… it is impossible, lord,' the intermediary objected, stiltedly, conscious of the curved steel at her chin.

Still the primarch didn't look at her.

'All things are possible,' the Khan said. 'Is this not the lesson of my Father's empire? You will do it, or you will find my ignorant kindred landed on the Red Planet, and they tend to break what they don't understand.'

The magos sent some kind of hurried signal to his speaker.

'If you have a schema in mind–' she started.

‘I do,’ he said. ‘Very much so. And once this one is done, you’ll do the same for the entire fleet under my command. What use is a single good sword, when we have the galaxy laid before us? I wish to have a storm of them. I tell you, priest of Mars, this is our creed, and the galaxy has seen nothing like it yet. Enable it, or show me one of your foul kind who can.’

There was a pause. The magos was clearly communicating, perhaps with its simulacrum helper or perhaps with something else. The skitarii never so much as twitched. Giyahun held position calmly, enjoying himself.

Finally, the intermediary indicated assent.

‘I have preliminary clearance,’ she said, her flat voice sounding close to annoyance. ‘These things will be done. To return to the matter of this day, all we require of you now, at this juncture, is a name. A name for this vessel.’

The Khan gestured to Giyahun to stand down, and the tulwar was withdrawn. Then the primarch turned away, strolling out towards the centre of the great unfinished command bridge. He looked up at the semi-completed terraces and the exposed matter of the great supportive beams. Above them all glittered the forcefield holding the breathable air in – beyond that was emptiness, a frigid waste lit by a harsh sun.

For a while the primarch gave no answer. He looked over his future domain, a star-borne citadel created for a conqueror, and the old covetousness kindled across his tight features. Already there was something there – desire, perhaps.

‘We’ll wait until it’s done,’ he said. ‘The name will come.’

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THREE

Days later, and they gathered in the Palace again. The chambers they had been given were capacious but bland, used for housing any number of dignitaries at the hub of Imperial power and so stripped of any ostentatious signs of particular allegiance. The floors were polished wood, the walls scoured sandstone. From below and above and around them came the layered hums of constant activity, the grind and hammer of machine tools and tramping boots. There was never any rest within the Palace, never any respite from the churn, churn, churn of constant preparation. A ship left for the void every second. Another arrived to take its place. It was the greatest movement of personnel and equipment in humanity's history – nothing before had come close, and most believed nothing would ever come close again.

Yesugei paced around the chamber's perimeter, peering through the windows as the sun set. The sky was criss-crossed with contrails, lit up by floating defence stations on heavy grav-plates and pierced by the twinkle of a billion spire-lights.

Giyahun was seated in one of the low plains-chairs they had brought down from their ship, christened the *Tchin-Zar* a year ago after its delivery from the Martian Legion reserve. The Khan sat, poking unenthusiastically at a dish of broiled meat. The Palace kitchens had endeavoured to produce something approximating Chogorian food, but it wasn't easy to match the remorseless diet of flesh and fermented dairy products that fuelled the warrior clans of the Altak.

A chime sounded in the corridor outside, and Hasik entered. The lord commander of the V Legion bowed to his primarch, then raised a quizzical eyebrow at the food.

'You have it,' the Khan said, sliding the bowl towards him. 'How goes the work?'

Hasik sat down, took a spoon and dutifully made inroads into the stew. ‘They’re tough,’ he said, chewing. ‘Skilled. Disciplined. Everything you’ll want.’

‘But?’

‘*Solid*.’ Hasik snorted a laugh. ‘Never seen one smile.’ He swallowed. ‘Some things I’ve learned. This Legion is machine heavy. They go to war in transports, and rely on the armour to get them in close. After that, their infantry tactics are standard. Remember the Qo battalions at Sha’ang? With the armoured *faduun*? That’s what they remind me of.’

The Khan looked at him with heavy eyes. ‘Can they be led?’

‘Of course they can be led,’ interjected Yesugei, standing on the far side of the chamber. ‘They have been led for eighty years already, and conquered more worlds than we ever conquered nations.’

‘Aya,’ said Giyahun, idly, ‘what use is that to us?’

‘I need to know if they can be moulded,’ said the Khan, sitting back in his low-slung plains-chair. ‘It will be years before our own kind enter this Legion. Even then, they’re already changing. No child of Altak ever saw a starship before we did. Now one hovers over the Khum Karta every week. What does that do to them?’

Yesugei turned to face them. ‘It changes everything. Their minds are opening up. That is what He wants. It is why He does this.’

Hasik swallowed again, then pushed the bowl away. ‘It can be done,’ he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘Just won’t be easy. They have city minds. They guard walls.’

‘And the zadyin arga?’ asked the Khan.

Hasik shrugged. ‘They don’t talk about it.’

‘Because that is terror to them,’ said Yesugei, walking over to where the others were gathered. ‘We were lucky. I have spoken to others. They call it Strife, or Old Night. Tell them of powers, and that is what they think of. I have been reading the accounts, the few they salvaged. I can see what they are scared of.’

‘An empire can’t be built on fear,’ said the Khan, looking up at his counsellor sceptically.

‘That is why they never speak of it,’ Yesugei said. ‘They push it away, pretend it never happened. For now.’

The Khan pondered that. As ever, his fingers strayed to his blade, catching at the wound leather of the hilt. He was restive here, caged within

walls placed within walls.

‘I know what you counsel,’ he said.

‘We are running out of days,’ Yesugei said. ‘Soon we will be back in the emptiness, and then there will be no more chances.’

‘But what can he tell me that my Father did not?’

‘I do not know. But he is only a little less powerful, and is the joint architect of this place.’

‘He is a slave.’

‘Perhaps. I counted myself powerful before I came here. I enjoyed the mastery of the storm. I enjoyed what I could do with it, for you, for the ordu. But I felt his presence as soon as we entered orbit, and knew that I had felt it already, only in dreams. I have met the Sigillite’s people now, and smelled the residual energy on their bodies, like pollen caught on silk. Maybe he is a slave. That may be true. But his power still dwarfs mine. Perhaps it dwarfs everyone else’s, save your incomparable Father’s.’

The Khan smiled back, a weary grin that briefly illuminated his features. ‘I’d trust you to best him. Anyone, for that matter.’ He stretched out his long arms, grimacing as his muscles flexed. ‘But I don’t have the stomach for more argument. Let them order their city here. Best we’re free of it.’

‘You can’t escape Him,’ Yesugei said. ‘None of you can.’

‘Sure of that?’

‘More than sure.’

For a moment the two of them tested one another, a teasing contest of wills. There could only be one winner, though, and the seer’s gaze fell away. He glanced ruefully at Hasik.

‘Speak to him, brother,’ Yesugei said. ‘If he will not listen to me–’

Hasik laughed. ‘He never listens to me either.’

Giyahun chuckled, toying with the long edge of his dagger. ‘He listens to Qin Xa.’

‘Only because Qin Xa never opens his mouth,’ replied Hasik.

‘Enough,’ said the Khan. He shot Yesugei a sour glance. ‘I know you, shaman. You’d wear at me every hour until the fleet was ready. So I’ll do it. I’ll speak. I’ll let him say his piece, and try not to show him the long edge of my tulwar when he angers me, which he will. Will that be enough? Will that make you happy?’

Yesugei bowed in gratitude. ‘I will only be happy when we are home again, Khagan.’

The Khan snorted, and turned away.

‘Then you’ll be waiting a long time,’ he said.

The woman Niasta guided him into the fortress. For all her self-assurance, she did not look directly at him, but lowered her damaged eyes whenever there was risk of contact. At first the primarch hardly noticed her, but as the long procession wore on, taking them deeper down into the Palace’s depths, the silence between them became harder to sustain.

‘It is an honour to accompany you, lord,’ she ventured, as they passed through the last of the courtier-inhabited levels and into colder arteries of hard-delved stone. ‘I have heard much of your home world, and it intrigues me.’

A thousand people had told the Khan that. At the start he had found it hard to countenance. Later on he had realised it was only a kind of courtesy – a way of initiating conversation. They no doubt said the same to all visitors from far-flung planets, scattered like jewels across the crumpled fabric of real space. Chogoris was obscure, but far from the most eccentric of worlds. Fenris was more savage, they said, and Colchis more extreme. Barbarus was almost unimaginable. Chogoris didn’t intrigue them. Nothing did, save the strata of power and their place within them.

‘What have you heard, then?’ he asked, not greatly interested in the answer. What did keep his attention was the stone around him – it was old, terrifyingly old, sunk into the bedrock long before the spires and domes that now formed the outer profile of the Palace were built. He breathed in the musty air, and its flavour reminded him of something far off and semi-forgotten, as if from childhood, except that his childhood had been experienced a long way from Terra.

‘That your warfare is conducted at speed,’ Niasta replied. ‘Not just as necessity demands, but as a founding principle. That is unique. No other Legion, not even the Fifth itself under its previous commanders, has adopted that core doctrine. There is an open question as to how well the Legiones Astartes template can accommodate it. After all, a single suit of power armour weighs several tonnes.’

The completeness of the answer surprised him. Perhaps her interest had been more than casual.

‘How long have you served him?’ he asked.

‘My adult lifetime. Since he became First Lord.’

‘And when was that?’

She turned to smile at him. It was the cool smile of a courtier used to living among those who were more powerful, used to delivering them bad news and remaining alive, massaging egos and assuaging anger.

‘He is the last,’ she said. ‘There were once many, now there is only one. Just as the Crusade reaches its apogee, only he remains. One day, he too will be just a memory, but not yet. Consider what that means.’

But there was no time. They reached a door, a naked slab of rock cut roughly into the face before them, pocked with the ancient marks of the chisel. Niasta placed her hand against it and hidden cylinders pulled it open, revealing a softly lit sanctum within.

The Khan looked at her a little longer, considering whether to press the question. Niasta looked up at him, her damaged eyes glistening in the dark, almost as if she were daring him to ask.

‘There is danger in your soul,’ he said eventually. ‘Watch where it takes you.’

Then he turned away, ducking under a lintel made for human dimensions, and the door slid closed behind him.

The chamber was small, less than ten metres in diameter. Candles had been set into alcoves within the rock, flickering and guttering as eddies of air moved like spectres across the flags.

Waiting for him was a grey-skinned ghoul, a living cadaver draped in heavy robes. His claw held a staff, and a cowl obscured his thin, flesh-stretched face. The man’s movements were stiff, as if arthritic, and his breathing was a rattle.

It was as if the Imperium were governed by the two faces of a single man – one preternaturally healthy, the other irredeemably sick. Perhaps being in the presence of the Emperor for so long did that to a mortal. Perhaps that was what Niasta had meant about him being the last – the last to survive proximity to that great dark star about which the fate of humanity revolved. Or maybe all the others had simply died of old age. Maybe they had never lived at all, and these were just more Terran lies.

‘My counsellor told me you wished to speak to me,’ the Khan said, standing before Malcador and folding his arms.

‘Jaghatai,’ said Malcador the Sigillite, right hand of the immortal Emperor. ‘A pity we did not do this earlier. They tell me you will be back in the void within days.’

‘That is what He made me for, is it not?’

‘You could stay longer. Others have. Your brother Vulkan spent many years here, and I came to know him well before he left for Nocturne.’

‘I have already given the order.’

The Sigillite nodded. ‘And that, too, was how we made you.’ He limped towards the primarch, skirting around a long stone sarcophagus and trailing his fingers along the dusty top. Then he drew himself up to his full height, pushed his cowl back from a withered brow and looked at the Khan carefully. ‘I never know what we’ll see when you come back. All of you surprise us.’

‘And yet you still press on.’

‘Of course. Everything rests on you.’

‘He said the same thing.’

Malcador leaned back against the sarcophagus edge, letting his staff rest on the stone. ‘Do you doubt it?’

‘I don’t know. You were strangely careless with your special project.’

‘We could not have expended more care. The power that took you from Terra was beyond imagination.’

The Khan remained static, like one of the age-darkened statues that stalked the shadows of that place. He saw rows of them against the far wall, each cowled and bearing a staff, mirror images of the living fossil that addressed him now.

‘I have conquest in my blood,’ the primarch said. ‘I have always hungered for it. Only now I know that you planted that desire there. You made me as an instrument of your own designs.’

‘We are all instruments.’

‘Except for Him.’

‘Oh, no – very much Him.’ The Sigillite placed his thin hands together. ‘Listen, I understand the problem. You were monarchs of your worlds, and now we ask you to fight for this one. You were never given the tutelage we had planned, and so the wrench is sudden. If we could postpone the Crusade for a hundred years in order to prepare you adequately, we would do so, but we cannot, for we race against the closing door of fate. All must be gathered in. But remember this – you are a son of Terra. You were made *here*.’

‘I was made on Chogoris.’

The Sigillite smiled. ‘I should put that keening self-pity behind you if you wish to earn the allegiance of your new army.’

The Khan turned on him, unclasping his arms as if he wished to draw his blade. ‘It is all a lie,’ he said fervently. ‘Every part of it. We’ll be burning their temples and executing their priests in return for a million worlds, all as ignorant as beasts. Is that what you wanted?’

‘It is necessary.’

‘We could tell them the truth.’

‘Do not be foolish.’

The Khan’s lips curled in disgust. ‘So much contempt for your own species.’

‘Yes, contempt!’ snapped the Sigillite. ‘If you had seen what I have seen, watched what a human may become when left alone in the dark, you would share it.’ He collected himself. ‘You were lucky, Jaghatai. Your world was no Caliban. We tell you of Old Night and you barely believe us, but that is not how most places were. The lie is noble. It is there to protect, to guard, not to deceive, for they *are not ready*.’

The Khan turned away, stalking further into the shadows. There were other tombs there, smooth with age, the names on the surfaces impossible to read.

‘I have heard this before,’ the primarch said. ‘There were empires on my home world that offered freedom to their slave castes, but only when they were ready. That moment, strangely enough, never came. In the end they had to take it for themselves, to die for it, and even then there were some who said the day had come too soon.’ He looked back at the Sigillite. ‘The truth will come out. You won’t be able to hold the blindfold in place, and once it slips, the fury of those you deceived will be limitless.’

Malcador nodded. ‘Which is why we rely on you – on your exceptional power, on your tactical genius. It is not enough to conquer the galaxy. You must conquer it swiftly, bring all under the rule of the Throne before the patterns of fate change and we lose this one chance. I tell you no falsehood when I say that this is everything. All depends on this. We have mere decades remaining, just the blink of an eye set against aeons, to accomplish it.’

The Khan smiled cynically. ‘And when all is finished, then we will revisit the lie.’

‘When all is finished.’

The primarch laughed, but there was no mirth in it. He tapped an armoured finger idly on the lip of one of the tombs. ‘I wonder some days

why you gave us minds at all. Machines would have given you less grief.'

'Less grief, surely. Less joy, too.' Malcador sighed, and wrapped his cloak tighter around his whip-thin body. 'You have found it hard to understand your Father. You wish Him to be more… *intelligible*. I understand that. But do not be seduced by the scale of His power – He has sacrificed more than any of us, and He does not use it for Himself. A man may pursue a single goal and become the master of that endeavour, only to find himself weakened in all other pursuits. The Emperor battles daily with forces beyond understanding, yet you expect Him to retain a mortal sympathy.' The Sigillite shook his head. 'He walks the paths of eternity. Be thankful He is able to converse with you at all.'

The Khan thought on that, staring pensively at the tomb. 'And what is gained,' he said, eventually, 'if we lose what we are? What victory is that?'

'The only one possible,' said Malcador.

'I cannot believe it.'

'Then stay. Speak to Him again. Listen to what He has to say.'

The Khan's eyes never left the tomb. His gaze, sharp as the raptor that had given him his moniker, seemed liable to bore into the granite. A tense silence fell across the chamber, broken only by the dull hum that always came up from the distant foundations, the one that made the earth tremble and the atmosphere feel thicker than soup.

'I suffocate in this place,' he said at last. 'More words won't change that.' He looked up. 'We already have our destination – the world He chose for us. There are enemies I will gladly slay for you. Perhaps, when the hunt is underway and I have prey under my blades, I will see the truth of what you say.'

'There is no truth out there that cannot be perceived from here,' warned Malcador.

'Then I will have to come back,' said the Khan, already restive, already moving. 'Some day, when the moment is right. Not before.'

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FOUR

The grey world was on fire, burning from equator to pole, kindled in a chain reaction of exploding gases and whipped up further by the encircling winds. Its orbital zone was a buffeting debris heap, testament to the system-class weapons used to break open the planetary defences. A few strangely ovoid ships still endured, their scorched flanks venting badly, all pursued now by vengeful packs of hunter-killers. Arcs of energy shot through the void, spat from the mouths of battleship lances and buttressed by the solid-round devastation of synchronised nova cannons.

Six separate Imperial Army battle groups were making their final landings. Troop carriers headed down through the inferno, shepherded by flights of atmosphere-capable gunships. Thousands of haulers had already made planetfall, disgorging regimental troops into the filmy miasma of world 90-2-12, otherwise known as Hoadh, otherwise known as the origin world of the xenos race who had taken to calling themselves, either in misplaced blasphemy or poorly aimed mockery, the nephilim.

The Imperial forces deployed were enormous, equipped with every conceivable item of wargear forged in the white heat of humanity’s most obscenely productive era – crawling squadrons of battle tanks, phalanxes of grav-flyers, rank upon rank of mechanised walkers spitting las-fire from heavy cockpit emplacements. Drop-capsules delivered infantry squads into a splattered semi-liquid terrain, each soldier equipped with gas masks, lasguns and full environment suits. Lumen beams pierced the gloom at ground level, and thick crawler tracks sucked in the mire, grinding their way through swampy approach lanes towards towering clusters of glistening, vine-straggled praise towers.

Hoadh was a sinkhole for the soul, a sump of despair, an entire planet lost in a dreamy stink of misplaced devotion. The atmosphere was an indeterminate soup of spores and drifting gas plumes, while the terrain was

a slough of vegetative mats and boiling stagnant pools. Enormous kelp-like forests swayed amid lazy columns of hazy precipitation, black-leaved against a dull grey bloom of ever-discharging rain clots.

To keep it burning required exceptional effort. Everything was saturated to the core, existing between the solid and the dissolved, and so promethium lines were thrown down in pipes six metres in diameter, the flamers emptied into that maw of dreary slime until even the sap-soaked branches began to crisp.

The forests were smouldering down to the roots now. The entire world had become a furnace through which the vengeful sons and daughters of Terra stalked in lumen-spotted ranks. Tracts of contested territory were blasted with heavy flamers and then scoured with follow-up las-barrages, a bludgeoning tide of flame that boiled off massive thunderheads and turned the atmosphere into a continental maelstrom of driven steam.

And that assault was enough, most of the time. It could do the job; it could hurt those the Imperium had come to purge. Most of the time – as ever, there were redoubts. There were places where the masters of that world, the cetacean-faced xenos who had enslaved and mind-gobbled billions, had chosen to make their last stands. Even as their fleets burned in the void above them and their great hydroponic vats were punctured and drained, the last of the nephilim had grimly retreated to their last city, clustering amid its greasy domes and condensate towers alongside the remnants of once extravagantly plundered slave races.

It had been Horus who had discovered the true nature of this xenotype. For a while, Imperial explorators had taken the nephilim to be a mid-tech-level species with a relatively benign profile, sluggish in their reaction to the expansion of the upstart Terran star empire – not a civilisation worth expending vast amounts of effort to subdue. That, it turned out, was a mistake. The diplomatic embassies sent in those early days were discovered years later, their husked bodies bolted to the interior of the nephilim’s empath chapels. Estimates of the population of enslaved or suborned humans ran into the billions – entire worlds, entire systems, dragged into the horrific embrace of a race so squalid that their only purpose, their only desire and their only industry, was to be adored.

The fanaticism they inspired was strongest in the weak and the exhausted, and so in the turmoil of the Age of Strife the nephilim had prospered, cooing words of soft comfort to the desperate while gently

ushering them under the portals of their empath chapels. Here the humans were shackled to psychic manifolds and made suitable for the needle-tipped matrices that would be quietly slipped under their cranial folds, primed to slowly drain the vitality from them. The xenos' warrior caste would even shed their own skins and drape them over mute slave-troops, augmenting them and mutating them, blurring the lines between species until the oldest and the most corrupt of their servants were hardly human at all, but a gene-spliced and flesh-stretched amalgam of supine domesticity.

To destroy the heart of this faith-generated culture, more strenuous methods were required. The nephilim's great cathedrals – organic, bulbous and slimy with the long fronds of Hoadh's foul vegetation – were guarded by the oldest and the mightiest of the xenos warriors, each taller and broader than a Dreadnought walker, armed with flesh-popping sonic weaponry and metamorphic armour hides. They lurched out from the murk, streaked with long trails of steaming moisture, their pulsating skins strobing with watery points of light, their smooth, expressionless faces somehow more nightmarish than if they'd broken into roars or leers.

The ultimate tendril hub rose out of grey-misted jungles, tier upon tier of organic ridges, thrusting into the clouds as high as humanity's own hive-city spires. Buried within that almighty hulk were the first and the oldest of the praise cathedrals, stained black with the blood of the absorbed, their walls a maze of spines and crusts and seeping moisture vents. The air above them rang with weird sonic reverb, dragged up from the souls of the ecstatic dying and repeated by the eerie screech-organs of their masters.

But this was no longer a war. The real fighting, the only stage of this xenocide that deserved the status of a contest, had ended weeks ago with the breaking of the nephilim fleet and the initial Legion shock-attack landings. This was the final strike, the coup-de-grace, the severing of the enemy's jugular.

In later centuries, remembrancers would speculate about the details of this campaign and its bloody conclusion, and remain frustrated that so little was known and would ever be known. But that day did enter the annals, with as much accuracy as was ever achieved in those confused, fast-moving times, on the strength of one incontrovertible fact.

When Hoadh died – its jungles burned and its cathedrals broken into slag – it marked the first great victory for the Legion now calling itself the Horde of Jaghatai, but which would thereafter be known to the Imperium by

a simpler title, a fused corruption of a Chogorian tribe name and a reference to the distinctive livery that they had worn since their primarch had taken command.

The Star Hunters were falling out of existence, that name becoming a piece of scholarly ephemera that would be forgotten long before the Great Crusade itself was declared formally over. When Hoadh fell in the year 884 of the glorious thirtieth millennium of mankind – so the archivists scratched on their sheets of vellum – it had been comprehensively destroyed by the remoulded and revivified Legion the galaxy was already beginning to refer to, with a moderate degree of wariness and a considerable degree of uncertainty, as the White Scars.

‘Hai Chogoris!’ roared Hasik, driving his Scimitar jetbike several points beyond its design tolerance and into combat.

His squadrons came with him – fifty warriors on jetbikes, sweeping and diving under the hanging vines, their profiles a blur of speed against a steaming backdrop of superheated swamp matter.

Sonic blasts shuddered at them from the walls, crystallising the air and making it punch and wobble. Three riders were caught by the impacts, hurled from their seats in a rain of blasted armour, their jetbikes’ crumpled chassis spiralling over and over before smashing into the ridged flanks of the city walls. The rest whooped and cried out, swerving low and fast, tracing arcs like knife cuts through the air.

Hasik pushed his mount lower, flicking the apex of some grasping xenos plant crown, before boosting into the open. The attack squadron came with him, streaking out towards the eastern walls of the nephilim’s citadel.

At precisely the same moment across fifteen other locations, more squadrons shot from cover and raced into range, strafing the walls from all angles. Dozens of drop pods burst through the roiling cloud cover, each aimed for a strategic position within the tangle of organic xenos architecture below. Pulse-artillery response was drowned out by the combined fusillade from both orbital and atmospheric Legion assets, detonating in a ruthlessly dense carpet of pinpoint explosions that pulverised fixed enemy positions and scrambled the defence comms grid into a perma-hiss of blown static.

Hasik’s unit powered up the incline of a long causeway, terminated by the soaring overhang of a processional gateway and flanked by powerful sonic augmenters. Above them swooped a trio of incoming Stormbirds, laying down an aegis of support fire. Everything was choreographed,

backed up, overlaid. An enemy would lock on to a Legion warrior only to find six more targeting signals closing in. The attack was remorseless, overwhelming, sense-shredding – just *too fast*.

Hasik closed on the gate, laughing hard, and unleashed his own weapon – a heavy bolter protruding from the curved prow of his thundering mount. Over forty identical counterparts opened up simultaneously, smothering the defensive return fire and drilling into the gateway beyond. The portal splintered, reeled, then exploded into a cloud of flying debris, and the jetbikes blazed through the still-tumbling remnants. Once inside, they roared up through narrow capillary ways, burning and blasting inside a web of grease-streaked buttresses.

The nephilim were individually powerful, but slow to react. Watching them move was like watching a human wade through water, and they struggled to mount a defence against such targeted brutality. Indentured slave-troops, many wearing the epidermis armour of their xenos masters, returned fire from defensive lines, bringing down a few of the jetbikes before being wholly overrun. Flesh-machine fusion constructs, some as big as knight walkers, waded into view, but they were obliterated before getting into fire range.

Over to the north, heavy Legion landers descended, surrounded by flickering las-fire, their energy cannons cycling up for block-scale devastation. Assault tanks were dropped from the claws of Thunderhawk transporters, splashing heavily into the mire and gunning forwards, their secondary weapons already letting loose as their main guns swung ominously towards designated targets.

Always moving, Hasik mouthed, pushing his jetbike so hard it shook from the extreme velocity. He barely noticed the kills his heavy bolter racked up as the eerie alien constructs swayed and smeared around him. *The blade moves, the limbs move, the centre of balance moves. Tilt, swing, push harder.*

Over on the western rim of the city, a large empath chapel was taken apart by incendiaries, folding in on itself in a rumple of atomised brace beams. Screams reverberated from the exploding maws of the praise cathedrals, ripped from semi-sentient minds as neuro-energy coils were crunched apart. By now the air itself had ignited, the ash blown across helm faceplates and engine intakes combusting in rolling waves. The Legion warriors punched through it, protected from the shaking heat-walls by their

superlative armour, their jetbikes threading long spear-lines through the boiling clouds and leaving contrails of living flame behind them.

Hasik saw a big nephilim xenotype rise up ahead, breaking out of the debris of a collapsing gun emplacement, its translucent flesh pulsing lime green in the fractured light. The air blistered and quivered, then tore open as its shriekpulse weapon emptied into the oncoming invaders.

Hasik had reacted before the shock wave was even born, ducking down out of the likely impact cone and gunning into an attack spiral through the blown debris. Two rune flashes told him of riders caught in the molecule-shredding vortex, their bikes atomised and their bodies thrown into tumbling scrap.

The xenos was a monster, a behemoth nourished on the anguished praise of thousands, rising more than four metres into the flame-swirled air, its aqueous mouth clamped open in a snarl. Its hide glistened with gristle-like rigidity from some species-wide metamorphic reaction, and at its feet came a stumbling army of semi-shock-blinded human infantry.

It only took a microsecond.

Gauge distance. Gauge velocity. Gauge mass.

Hasik's jetbike boosted at it, tilting almost ninety degrees to avoid a missile-damaged bulkhead before blasting into straight line hell-speed. The shriekpulse weapon scythed around expertly to blow the machine apart, but Hasik had already kicked himself free of the exploding saddle. Flying fast, he boosted clear of the spherical blastwave, pulling his *guan dao* from its straps in mid-lunge.

He struck his target a fraction of a second later, driving the blade two-handed into the nephilim's chest and carrying on through like a living weapon, already churning and twisting the long blade to rip out as much gut and spleen and stomach as possible.

They tumbled together, thrown back beyond the gun emplacement and rolling down into the detritus-choked thoroughfare beyond. The nephilim roared, its innards half-torn free in a slick of pale grey fluids, its three-fingered hands scrabbling to swat its tormentor from its belly.

The blade moves.

Hasik hacked down, shattering the rigid armour shell.

The limbs move.

Then he was breaking clear, using the strength of his power armour to alter his trajectory, thrusting to one side to evade the xenos' crushing fists.

The centre moves.

The pursuing jetbikes opened up with their heavy bolters, confident their master had done enough to get out of the way, and the reeling xenos disappeared beneath a thudding wall of mass-reactive explosions, swamped and drowned and gorged with them until it choked itself apart in a strangled whine of mauled and bolt-pulverised flesh.

The rest of the squadron sped overhead, its work done, already hunting for more targets. Only one jetbike slowed, just a little, to scrape down to neck height. Hasik's arm thrust up from the debris, catching the saddle of the thundering mount and hauling himself up to join the rider. Even as the bike surged back into full velocity he righted himself, standing beside the rider's saddle, holding on to the roaring engine-platform one-handed.

'A new way of war,' voxed the pilot in Khorchin, a good-natured Terran named Righal.

By then Hasik was laughing once more, swinging his gore-latticed guan dao around his head and leaning hard into the onrushing hurricane.

'And a *good* one, yes?' he voxed back, grinning savagely.

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FIVE

Three hours after the assault commenced, the outcome moved beyond doubt. The city’s perimeter was demolished or burning. The interior glowed in a jumble of radiation and steadily expanding smoke plumes. Stormbirds strafed freely, driving towards the beleaguered city centre where three mighty cathedral domes, swollen and draped in psionic cabling, surged into the tortured skies amid a sea of unleashed plasma discharge.

More Legion infantry were landed in the secured zones, and they pushed out rapidly from the dropsites, destroying remaining pockets of resistance and linking up to form preordained battlefronts. Tank squadrons trundled up hard-gouged fire lanes, their barrels superheated from rapid firing and their smokestacks belching. It was as if a noose of fire were rapidly closing about the shaken apex, unbroken and impenetrable.

The last and greatest of the nephilim, colossal creatures bloated by the most extreme acts of adoration, withdrew to their final line of defence, taking those of their slaved troops who could still stand with them into the yawning precincts of the central sanctuaries. Motivated by the dregs of a fanaticism that had once led them to enslave the stars, the nephilim activated the rings of atomic-class explosives that would incinerate the cathedral foundations and turn the entire structure into a sacrificial offering to their imminently expiring god-caste.

Had those explosives detonated, the blast radius would have been close to fifty kilometres across – more than enough to annihilate the entire frontline of combatants in an orgy of mutual destruction. Perhaps the xenos commanders calculated that the enemy would even allow them to do it, bringing a speedy end to a war that had already claimed a body count of billions.

But the Khan had not sent his sons blindly into battle. The Legion had scoured intercepted audex lines for weeks, and the primarch had worked his

xenolexicographers hard to tease out the full implications of the nephilim's death-cult philosophy. This was combined with a long period of supra-orbital scanning of the urban layers, cross referenced with archived intelligence on culture and psychology taken from battle reports compiled by IX and XVI Legion strategeos. Scenarios were rehearsed, contingencies drawn up, capabilities analysed. When the time came, and Imperial troops were finally let loose onto Hoadh, there was little the xenos command could do that had not been foreseen.

Thus was a final wave of Legion assets held back, poised on the teleportation chambers of the fleet in readiness for one final eventuality. As the regular troops closed in on the cathedral approaches, racing up the wide stairways with blades humming, the order was given, and warp coils snarled into life across twenty separate ship-borne transponders.

In every atomic depot, Stormseers materialised at ground level and immediately swung into action, throwing stasis fields across the degrading containment units. One by one, the countdowns froze, and escorted teams of enginseers moved in to disable the neural connectors controlling the stockpiles.

While the Stormseers destroyed the ring of atomics, a second phalanx of warriors a hundred strong transported straight inside the cathedral's nave itself, materialising far ahead of the rapidly approaching Imperial battlefront to set themselves against the full concentration of remaining xenos. They were clad, as all the warriors of the Khan's Legion now were, in ivory and gold, their Cataphractii Terminator plate still fizzing with warp residue and their long glaives snarling. Las-fire opened up immediately from all sides, filling the gloomy interior with hard flashes, but the rain of impacts skipped harmlessly from such heavy armour.

Then the *keshig*, the honour guard of the primarch himself, responded. A stormfront of bolt-shells and volkite beams blazed out from the teleport locus, shattering arches and gouging stone. The Terminators powered into the attack, still highly mobile despite their formidable bulk, crashing into the enemy amid a wall of machine noise.

The surviving nephilim hurried to engage them, surrounded by their strange auras of sonic shock and aiming their shriekpulse weaponry, but this was rank slaughter now. Their reality-ripping guns had negligible effect on armour plate designed to withstand the physical effects of void-boarding

actions, and the Terminators crashed into the enemy in a ruinous wave of servo-accelerated violence.

Their leader, a towering figure with a dragon helm, crunched up the wide steps towards the cable-draped altar, a long curved blade whistling around him in disruptor-spitting arcs. A blue-strobing nephilim strode to intercept him, but was dispatched contemptuously with a dazzlingly fast figure of eight from the flaring tulwar blade.

The oldest and foulest of the nephilim, the patriarch of the adored, sat enthroned under the apex of the cathedral's sagging dome, its seat a forest of glistening cables and neural fronds. The creature's fish-like skin, slack with age and desperation, swelled across slippery armrests. Dozens of slaved attendants shrank back against its obscene bulk as if for protection, their disbelieving faces hidden behind neuro-dermic masks, too terrified even to fire the effectual weapons they still possessed.

The xenos rose tremulously to its huge feet, a swaying mountain of translucent flesh weighed down with a ceremonial cowl, its tiny black eyes sunk deep within folds of sweat-rank skin. Wearily, knowing the judgement of the galaxy had already fallen, it drew a long black blade, knapped and faceted. The air around it shook, disturbed by the sonic harmonics emitted from the weapon.

'This will… damn you,' the creature intoned in broken machine-Gothic through some kind of vox-translator box clamped around its jawline and trailing wet power plugs. 'I lay… curse upon you.'

The dragon-helmed Legion warrior did not pause, or even glance at the fragile bodyguards, but launched himself into the monster before him. His first blow cracked the black blade; the second shattered it. The patriarch staggered backwards, stumbling against the throne and slipping on the bloody floor. Screams filtered up through the cathedral's high vaults, repeated and augmented by the slaughter taking place in the neural-harvester chapels.

The xenos staggered away from the onslaught, panting, for the first time at eye level with the vengeful leviathan of ceramite and gold that pursued it. The tulwar rose, casting a curved shadow across the monster's thick neck.

But it never fell. The last of the killing ended in the nave beyond, and the echoes of bolter-clamour slowly died away. Faint, strangled sobbing could be heard welling up from the depths, and from outside the giant walls came the muffled booms of ongoing ordnance.

The patriarch focussed blearily on the tulwar’s edge and cracked a dry smile. ‘Thought it would be… your primarch. Would have… preferred that.’

Then, from the base of the stairs, a final column of teleportation energy snarled into spitting life. From its glowing heart stepped a figure in immaculate ivory and gold. A heavy crimson cloak swirled about him, caught in the eddy of the locus beam as it snapped out of existence. He carried a naked *dao* blade, as long as a man’s height, engraved with ancient Khorchin battle-curses. His face was exposed – raw and severe, the bronzed skin as hard as iron and marred by the long scar that ran the length of his left cheek.

When the Khan gazed at his enemy, there was an imperiousness there, a disdain that had been cultivated over years of similar conquests. He trod the wide steps at his leisure, never looking about him even as his assembled warriors bowed before him.

The nephilim emitted what passed for a chuckle, and fluid cascaded down its chins.

‘So will you… do it, then? End it… here?’

The Khan glanced at his dragon-helmed warrior. ‘Did it fight well, Xa?’ he asked.

‘No, Khagan.’

‘Then it doesn’t deserve the honour.’

He turned away, even as the master of the keshig plunged his blade into the nephilim’s neck and hauled it out the other side, bisecting the joint cleanly.

The Khan surveyed the site of battle. The blood was still hot, the screams were still audible, but already there was an impatience in him: to bring this war to its conclusion; to find the next one; to seek the harder test that would temper his still-bipartite Legion and hammer out its remaining imperfections.

But it was done. There was something to report back to Terra, something that would no doubt please the Sigillite. Comms were already coming in from both Hasik and Giyahun – they had secured their final targets and were racing one another to reach the cathedral first. Yesugei had destroyed the last of the atomic stores and was now commencing the task of recovering any slaves who still had their minds intact. A hundred queries and requests for orders flashed across the Khan’s retinal battle-feed, almost

all of which could be delegated to field commanders but gave an indication of the scale of what still needed doing.

The Khan looked up, scanning across the high vaulting. Pods lined the walls, clogged with nutrient cabling. Many were smashed and glossy with burst liquids, but a few remained intact, cradling the foetal curl of human occupants. This building alone housed hundreds of such pods, slowly draining the energy from their occupants and feeding it to the soul-gluttons who had harvested them. The chapels and silos beyond would hold thousands more, row upon row, an industrial machine-city constructed around the delusions of the fearfully religious.

You were lucky, Jaghatai… We tell you of Old Night and you barely believe us.

Qin Xa drew alongside him. He had unsealed his helm and locked it to his armour, and now his calm, steady face looked out at the horrors shackled above them.

‘Initial assessment,’ the Khan said.

‘Three Terran contingents reached their forward objectives too slowly. They are still more thorough than us, though – this is something we need to preserve.’

‘Try to preserve everything, and we preserve nothing. I want unity of doctrine.’

Qin Xa let slip a wry half-smile. ‘Unity?’ he asked.

‘You reported tracking locks prior to our assault. Are the augurs still getting those?’

‘No. But they may just be getting cleverer – our attention has been elsewhere for a while.’

‘Maybe. Or maybe they are just a long way off.’

‘If so, more reason to be interested.’

The Khan sheathed his long blade, unused in this action. Since its forging it had been employed only sparingly, a weapon reserved for a threat worthy of it.

‘You can conclude this, I trust?’ the primarch asked.

Qin Xa gave a final glance at the racks of pods, the foul machinery of essence-extraction and the morbid corpses of the soul-gluttons.

‘It will all be destroyed,’ he said, with some feeling.

‘Not a stone left of it,’ the Khan agreed, marching down the long nave. ‘Not a single one left alive.’

‘Our first sole conquest, Khagan,’ called Qin Xa after him. ‘In the shadow of no others now. Cause for pride, perhaps?’

The Khan kept walking.

‘Not yet,’ he muttered, his boots ankle-deep in blood and muck. ‘Not by a long way.’

The fires took a long time to die down – Hoadh’s sun set, but the difference in ambient light level was almost imperceptible due to the volume of ash in the atmosphere.

Every city of the nephilim was located, taken and razed. Hunter-killer teams of Legion warriors were dispatched into the depths of the steaming jungles, shadowed by flights of augur-stuffed flyers. The last of the xenos’ void fleet was blown apart before making the jump into the warp, and squadrons of Legion frigates prowled deep into the system’s depths to seek out enemy remnants and stand guard on the Mandeville points.

The huge bodies of the xenos were transported to pyre-zones and immolated in heaps, scrutinised the whole time by the *emchi* apothecaries and enginseers from the fleet. Initial hopes that significant volumes of slaves could be freed proved overly optimistic – most were too damaged even for safe reuse in servitor duty, and so were euthanised in long, dreary cavalcades before being consumed by the same massed infernos.

That duty was hated, causing localised insubordination from some elements of the Imperial Army regiments. When asked to issue punishment, the Khan demurred. ‘It’s to their credit,’ he told Giyahun. ‘Get them back into their ships. Give this task to the Legion.’

So it was that, slowly, the Imperial Army units were withdrawn from combat, consolidated, then lifted back into the waiting orbital haulers. The remainder of the mop-up work was done by warriors of the ordu, better equipped to survive the plentiful array of booby-trapped vaults and hab-units as well as the grim task of mass culling.

A few humans did survive, though – recent arrivals to Hoadh, some even plucked from xenos transports before they could be unloaded into the empath chapels. Yesugei was assiduous in hunting them down, sparing as many from the furnaces as he could. The healthiest were questioned, their confused responses recorded by Legion archivists and prepared for dispatch to Terra.

One of them, a man calling himself Elias, was judged strong enough to be taken before the Khan. Being brought into the presence of a primarch,

even for an undamaged human, could induce extreme reactions, so hopes for genuine elucidation were slight. Still, after treatment, Elias' vital signs had recovered to within almost normal parameters, and he seemed willing enough to meet his liberator. Yesugei came with him, and the meeting took place amid the ruins of a secondary empath chapel some distance from the burning central complex.

The Khan removed his helm, locked it to his armour and folded his arms. Elias stood before him, flanked by Legion guards, looking beyond pathetic – a skinny, stooped invalid with hollow eyes.

'What was your origin world?' the primarch asked him.

Elias looked up, for a moment too awestruck to form words. The Khan waited.

'My origin world… Pelessar, lord. Pelessar.'

The Khan glanced at Yesugei. 'Mark for scrutiny.' Then he returned to the cowering man. 'What do you know of your captors?'

Elias' face flickered into a smile – the nervous, betraying smile of guilt or fear, or maybe excitement. 'Captors? You mean, lord… I don't know. They were not–'

'The nephilim. The giants.'

'Angels.' Elias was grinning now, as if he couldn't help himself. 'Our angels.'

The Khan's expression tightened. 'These places,' he said, gesturing around them. 'You would have been next.'

Elias' fragile gaze shot up to the smashed extraction pods, many still saturated with blood and fleshplug-lubricants. 'We were the faithful.' He began to look confused. 'I don't know why. It's… *hard*.'

The Khan stared at him closely, as if his dark eyes could delve straight into the man's damaged mind. 'You've seen what they did here.'

Elias nodded.

'Are you not angry?'

Elias shook his head. 'They taught us that–'

'They *fed* on you.'

Elias chuckled. 'And what is better for a man, but that he nourishes the gods?'

The Khan sighed, and turned to Yesugei. The Stormseer was looking thoughtful.

‘You see the lesson we are being given?’ the primarch asked, almost accusingly.

‘A blunt one, certainly,’ replied Yesugei.

‘Malcador must think us simple-minded.’

‘Still. A reminder of inherent weakness.’

‘You should be insulted he even tried it.’ The Khan raised a finger by a fraction, and Elias was pulled away from his presence, grinning confusedly all the while. ‘It changes nothing.’

Yesugei looked less convinced, but did not reply.

Eventually, the Khan unfolded his arms, shaking them down. Once free, his gauntlet strayed, as it always did, to the hilt of his blade.

‘Hasten the clean-up,’ he growled, making to leave. ‘It’s time we moved on.’

The V Legion fleet pulled out of high orbit seven local – roughly nine Terran-standard – days later, leaving the remainder of the outstanding compliance work to be undertaken by three of the accompanying Imperial Army divisions. Their commander, an experienced general named Targon Klask, had initially protested, having been under the impression that the entire expeditionary fleet would remain intact and committed to full compliance activities for several weeks. However, once Hasik was dispatched to pass on the primarch’s direct expression of intent, the protests had dried up swiftly, and preparations were made for the division of forces.

The V Legion itself would not remain unified either. In the five years since its first great muster in the Solar System, considerable effort had been expended to propagate the new Chogorian-inspired cultural practices throughout the entire Legion. Now that Hoadh had been destroyed, and in a manner that would have been recognised by any rider of the Altak, that imperative was overtaken by a more deep-seated desire to let the individual khans have their head. Companies, more generally referred to as brotherhoods now, were given planetary coordinates to chase down, most gleaned from the addled minds of the nephilim’s slaves, some taken from standing Crusade war plans, but all of them sundered across huge stellar distances.

In theory, compliance assets would be sent out from Terra to complete the reconstruction of Hoadh and its tributary worlds. As for when that might be, none could say. There was no effective liaison in place between the Legion high command and the glacial structures of the Administratum.

Some thought that ought to change; others were perfectly happy with the way things were. In the absence of a clear signal from the Khan, nothing was done, and the necessary business of contact was left to Klask's extensive, overworked staff.

So dispersal went ahead. The Legion flagship, completed to the primarch's specifications three years previously and christened – on a suggestion from Magos Dominus Galithium Vo-Phoex, no less – the *Swordstorm*, pulled smoothly from its orbital berth, escorted by a minimal protective cordon of four destroyers.

Hasik had taken the *Tchin-Zar* to head up his Horde division, while Giyahun had taken the *Lance of Heaven*, each tracing different paths into the deep void. All had their targets, spread out across the abyss like the old isolated citadels rising from outcrops on the eternal plain.

'Good hunting,' was all the Khagan had told them both before they departed, raising a flask of *halaak*.

Other Legions would not have allowed themselves to become so diffuse, perhaps, but in this too was the old method honoured. The archetype of the White Scars was the hunting eagle, the predator loosed to wheel into the open sky. The Terrans had accepted it; the Chogorians understood it implicitly.

Qin Xa remained on the flagship, as was his duty, as did Yesugei after dividing the Legion's zadyin arga between the various divisions.

'We will need a better system for this, Khagan,' the Stormseer had told his master during the somewhat messy departure from Hoadh.

'Did we have one before?' the Khan had asked sceptically.

'We were not conquering the stars before.'

'If they don't know where their fate should take them,' the primarch had said, waving his hand unconcernedly, closing the discussion, 'what hope for the rest of us?'

The ships had weighed void-anchor then, boosting their plasma drives and setting course for the next warzone in the series. The Khan's flagship had broken the veil first, as if itching to get away from a planet where only low-grade killing had been offered, hungry to find worlds where a better class of enemy lay in wait.

Once in the warp, the primarch departed the command bridge and returned to his private chambers, taking only Qin Xa with him.

‘So,’ the Khan said, unhooking the cloak from his shoulders and throwing it over the back of his plains-chair, ‘we’re still being tracked.’

The keshiga shrugged. ‘Hard to say, Khagan. It may be an artefact of the ranged augurs. Or perhaps something designed to look like an artefact of the ranged augurs. Or nothing at all. What do you want me to do?’

The Khan reached for the seal of his gorget, unclipping the torc-like gold rim. Then he unfastened the leather bindings of his hair, letting the long black tresses fall loose over his ivory armour.

‘We could outpace this shadow,’ he said.

‘Almost certainly, if you wished it.’

The Khan smiled. ‘But you’d be right to disapprove.’ He went over to a low rosewood table and poured a fresh flask of fermented milk. ‘It’s one of ours. An inquisitive mind, drawn to our light like a moth. We’re a curiosity still, I think. But which one? And do I care enough to find out?’

Qin Xa returned the smile. ‘For as long as it intrigues you, yes.’

The Khan drained his cup and wiped his mouth before reaching for another flask.

‘Do not make it easy for them – keep the ship moving.’ He had an almost childlike expression on that grizzled face now. ‘If they want to find us, they’ll have to work for it.’

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SIX

It took two standard months, to the extent such things could be measured against an objective standpoint. Three minor campaigns, lightning raids on what had been nephilim plunder-worlds, took place in the interim, further honing the Legion’s expertise but doing little to test them. As far as could be established, Qin Xa was proved correct – none of the xenos remained alive, and what remained were the human dregs of their slave empire, still committed to fighting even once their gods and angels had been ripped away from them.

More cathedrals were burned, more cities demolished, more signals sent to the following compliance fleets indicating they were clear to start the work of resettlement and formal incorporation into the Imperium. The *Swordstorm* itself pushed ever further out into the uncharted void, travelling now at such a pace that astropathic communications with the Corps Logisticae became even more unreliable than usual.

But they couldn’t entirely shake the sensor blip that had dogged them since before arriving at Hoadh – a faint shadow on one of the long-range feeds, as if something were making scatter-soundings and looking to analyse anomalous returns. Even deep in the warp, Yesugei would come to the Khan with a wry look on his face.

‘At it again?’ the primarch had asked, the last time it had happened.

‘I think they’ve given up on machines,’ the Stormseer had replied. ‘Now I get whispers in my dreams.’

The battleship pressed on, maintaining the hard pace it had set ever since leaving the Luna void-docks with its extravagantly upgraded plasma drives and replacement livery. Not until they were on the perimeter of the subsector, poised to boost across the unmapped region of lightless void known as the Lhostrum Gulf, did the phantom readings crystallise into something more tangible.

‘We are being contacted, Khagan,’ reported the *Swordstorm*’s master of signals, seven hours before the scheduled commencement of the next warp cycle.

The Khan raised an eyebrow, turning to Yesugei, who stood beside the command throne. ‘Imperial?’ he asked.

‘Ident prefixes indicate the Ninth Legion Astartes – originator ship, the *Red Tear*.’

Even as the master of signals finished speaking, glowing runes appeared across the augur lenses.

‘The primarch of the Blood Angels requests audience with his brother-primarch of the Fifth Legion Star Hunters,’ intoned the *Swordstorm*’s mistress of astropaths from her bird-nest throne set high up amid a tangle of synapse conduits. ‘He congratulates him on prolonging this chase for so long, but asks now for permission to come aboard for formal reception.’

The Khan pondered that for a moment, watching the locator-runes swim closer. They were all still a long way out from visual range, and working hard to match pace with the *Swordstorm*’s pre-jump cruising velocity.

‘What do you think?’ asked Yesugei.

‘That I’d prefer to see inside his ship than let him on board mine,’ replied the Khan, getting up from the throne and gesturing for the keshig to make preparations. ‘And that you’d better come too.’

The flagship of the Blood Angels Legion was as much an object of beauty as an instrument of war. Every surface of its ten-kilometre-long structure was adorned in the classical Baal idiom, drawn from the rust-red deserts in which the heritage of an older, more intricate civilisational impulse had been semi-buried amid cataclysmic wars. Some said it was that fusion of devastation and aeons-long patrimony that had given the Blood Angels their intense aesthetic sense – a reverence for the past, combined with the bitter awareness of history’s callousness. They created artefacts for eternity, imbuing them with both strength and elegance as a defiant cry against the impermanence that had nearly destroyed them.

As the Khan’s shuttle passed along the long ventral hull section before pulling up towards the towers of the bridge, he took in the near-obsessive decoration on the gunwales and blast-plating: the golden faces with their sculpted locks of curled hair; the tracery of bronze set into jet panelling; the sweep of the mass-bearing superstructure as it wove between purely artistic

additions. Compared to the *Red Tear*, the *Swordstorm* looked almost stripped bare, a shard of bone set beside a casket of jewels.

‘I can admire this,’ the Khan mused as the spires and domes slipped past below them.

Qin Xa was unmoved. The master of the keshig had austere personal tastes. Yesugei looked ambivalent, concentrating, as ever, as much on the unseen as the seen.

‘We are being studied,’ he said finally. ‘They are not shy about deploying their witches.’

The Khan looked up at him sharply. ‘Powerful?’

‘This is a Legion showpiece, Khagan,’ Yesugei said. ‘So yes, frighteningly powerful.’

The shuttle ghosted towards a cavernous hangar entrance, where squares of Blood Angels infantry were waiting as an honour guard. At their head was a warrior encased in pure gold armour that flashed under the hangar’s lumen banks. That battleplate was as intricate as everything else on the ship, polished to such a sheen that it might almost have been glass. The warrior wore no helm, and the face revealed was hard-edged and sculpted, like one of the many graven images that ran along the friezes and pilasters around them.

The Khan descended from the alighted shuttle, accompanied by Yesugei on his left and Qin Xa on his right, a minimal escort of four Terminator-armoured keshig warriors following behind them.

The unhelmed Blood Angels legionary bowed – a courtly gesture.

‘Welcome to the *Red Tear*, my lord,’ he said. ‘I am Azkaellon of the Sanguinary Guard. The Angel is eager to meet you, having heard so much of your accomplishments from a distance.’

The Khan acknowledged him with a nod. On Terra these encounters had often been awkward, with the primarch struggling to reel in his contempt for that world’s formless army of functionaries and courtiers, but here there was none of that. Azkaellon and the Khan regarded one another and both seemed satisfied with what they saw – warriors of the most strenuous breed, immaculate and uncompromising.

The Khan and his retinue were taken up through the battleship’s many tiers, and as they neared the command levels, the marble pillars and red-veined floors became more opulent. They were escorted to the primarch’s

receiving chambers, set a few hundred metres beyond the mighty observation dome at the summit of the bridge complex.

Azkaellon paused at two gilt-faced doors marked with elaborate interlocking images of thorns and flowers. ‘It was my primarch’s wish that you should confer in private, brother to brother. If it pleases you, lord, we can… entertain your retainers.’

Yesugei laughed. ‘A test of arms?’ he murmured. ‘Very… gladiatorial.’

Qin Xa’s attention stirred at last, and he looked at the Sanguinary Guard with renewed interest.

The Khan gave his assent, and entered the room alone. As the doors closed behind him, the muffled tread of armoured boots headed away, companionably enough, to the duelling pits.

‘My sons are curious about you,’ came a voice from the far side of the chamber. ‘You must forgive them. I am too, if I’m honest.’

The room was large. Ranks of columns supported a high coffered ceiling, the panels decorated with plasterwork sigils of the Blood Angels home world. Porcelain vases stood on brass-topped tables. A basalt sculpture of an idealised human grappling with a writhing serpent dominated the centre of the space, under which a high dome had been raised, inlaid with a mosaic depicting the red walls of the famed fortress-monastery of the Blood Angels.

Everything was symmetrical, arranged in strict geometric proportion. The harmony was palpable, as concrete as the superficial decoration that only served to enhance the underlying principle. The architect of those chambers had been a spiritual soul as well as an intellectual.

And it was likely, of course, that the Khan was looking at him now.

The Angel Sanguinius was not merely beautiful. *Beauty* was a strangely cheapened word for the aura that the primarch of the IX Legion possessed. He was too dangerous and too nakedly predatory for that, and yet it was impossible not to be drawn to that smooth, pale face, so like the golden masks that adorned the flagship’s outer plating. When he moved, it was with a dancer’s unconscious poise. Everything was the epitome of the human ideal, save for the one obvious flaw, and yet even that – those ice-white wings that marked him out as that most hated and feared of things, a mutant – had a symmetry of its own.

Sanguinius came up to his brother, a goblet in each hand, and handed one to the Khan.

‘To fraternity,’ he said, raising his.

The wine was unctuous, heavily spiced, no doubt priceless.

‘You must accept my apologies,’ the Angel said, gesturing towards two immense thrones carved from mahogany and capped with ivory. ‘My herald was mistaken from the outset – they tell me that Star Hunter is a name no longer to be uttered.’

‘No apology needed,’ the Khan said, seating himself awkwardly opposite his brother. Despite himself, he could not help staring at the way the whispering wing quills settled around the Angel as he reclined, like a shimmering cloak of silver pinions. ‘It means nothing to us.’

‘White Scar,’ said Sanguinius, amused, though not maliciously. ‘Those are the two words now making us talk from Terra to Ultramar. Would it flatter you to know that you are a source of some fascination, brother? That there was a race among us to see who could corner you first?’

‘Not especially.’

‘No. I guess not.’

‘We were Talskar, that was the origin of it,’ the Khan said. For some reason, sitting there in the presence of this dazzling, ethereal presence, he felt there should be some explanation. ‘Our livery now, as it was on Chogoris, is white. They misheard the first, they observed the second. Their words, not ours.’

Sanguinius shrugged. ‘We’re all made into images for them. That is our purpose, you might say.’ He leaned forwards conspiratorially. ‘And between you and me…’ he flashed his impossibly handsome smile, ‘I am *not really an angel*.’

The Khan laughed at last. ‘And such things are impossible, or so our Father told me.’

‘Yes, I had the same conversation with Him. Somewhat awkwardly, in my case.’ Sanguinius took a long sip of wine. ‘I’ve been hunting you for a while, Jaghatai. My compliments – your Legion has learned some shipmastery. I thought my crews were good, but I believe yours could school them.’

‘We’re used to staying on the move.’

‘Clearly. And the destruction of Ninety-Two-Twelve – impressive. Once I heard you had located the home world, I made for it, expecting you to be there for some weeks.’

‘You’ve fought them before.’

‘On Melchior. The knowledge that they are wiped out gives me satisfaction. And they are, I take it, exterminated?’

‘All of them,’ the Khan said darkly.

‘Then I relish the prospect of never hearing them mentioned again.’ Sanguinius cradled his goblet in the palm of his hand, swilling it absent-mindedly. ‘All xenos are foul, but my sons developed a particular hatred for those.’

‘Then why were you not sent to destroy them?’

‘Your pardon?’

‘You had the measure of them.’ The Khan took a swig of his own. ‘We used intelligence your Legion had gathered. I wonder why you were not sent to finish the task.’

The Angel shrugged. ‘We had other battles.’

The Khan smiled cynically. ‘I’ve not been doing this for as long as you, but I’m not slow-witted.’ He placed his goblet beside him and leaned forwards in the throne. ‘We were sent there to witness the depravities of devotion. Through this we were enjoined to understand the wisdom of the Imperial Truth.’

‘You do not see the need for it?’

‘I’m yet to be convinced.’

‘I’d heard the rumours.’

‘This is where you tell me that I need to understand the necessity – that we shield them for their own good, and that the deceptions are noble, for all that they remain illusion.’

Sanguinius said nothing for a while. He looked at his brother thoughtfully, the last of his smile dying away. ‘You have psykers in your Legion,’ he said at last.

‘Of course.’

‘A Librarius?’

‘Of a kind.’

‘Then that is already a refutation,’ the Angel said. ‘The populace can believe our powers are bounded by science. Even our generals, if they want to. We know it isn’t.’

The Khan looked at his brother warily, as if cautious to avoid some kind of trap. ‘And what do you suppose that leaves us with?’

‘I will not debate with you of gods and monsters,’ the Angel said, ‘but the psyker cannot be avoided. Already there are those among us who wish

to see them banished, shut away or blunted lest they unlock something fouler within us. Those voices are growing stronger. Despite what you may believe, my wayward brother, the Throne listens to its sons. One day, if we are careless, we will lose all these things, and then we will be the ones at fault, for we did nothing.'

The Khan looked sceptical. 'I care nothing for what another primarch does.'

'They won't stop at their own Legions.' Sanguinius remained reclined, almost languid, his pristine golden robes catching the candlelight. 'For the puritan, there is no comfort in scouring one's own house; all houses must be made clean. You are on your own, Jaghatai, heading further into the void, an empire unto yourself, so you don't hear the whispers.'

'And I care nothing for whispers.'

Sanguinius snorted. 'You should. I've seen worlds destroyed by them.' He too placed his goblet to one side. 'Word has come to us of your gifted caste. Stormseers, yes? You know as well as I do that denying the far side of the veil only hampers the pace of the Crusade. You could be a powerful ally to us, were you convinced to add your voice to ours. Numbers are important.'

The Khan said nothing.

'Magnus is the greatest,' the Angel went on. 'In this matter, he carries the most weight, but he is… controversial. The preservation of this requires reasonable heads, ones who can make the case without extremity.'

'Now you come to it,' the Khan said. 'What you wished to say. So tell me plainly.'

'A defence of the Legion Librarius. A unified proposition – its dangers acknowledged and its benefits defined. At present, when our psykers are named sorcerers, we have no reply, for what do those words even mean? Scholarship is needed, a greater understanding of what we have. Your tradition is as rich and subtle as any – we wish for you to stand with us.'

The Khan thought on that. 'I've never desired fellowship with any of you,' he said eventually, almost uncertainly, as if the sentiment were being dragged out of him. 'Do not take that as pride. More like necessity.' He grimaced. 'I find obligation to others… difficult. When I see walls, I wish to escape them. That is a flaw, no doubt, but then we were made the way we are for a reason. You would not find me an easy colleague.'

The Angel laughed. ‘Have you met the master of Olympia yet? These things are all relative.’

‘Our weather-makers are central to who we are. They fought with us before He came. They will do so for as long as we take up blades.’

‘Then defend them.’

For a moment longer they held one another’s gaze, as if embarked on some silent test of will. The similarity between them was evident then – two demigods, created from the same source and imbued with the same terrifying level of self-belief. The Angel was the more splendid in aspect, his outline hazy with the gold reflection from his artificer plate, yet the Khan, lord of the plains-world, matched him in stature. As ever with him, there was the sense of something hidden, an elusiveness that was integral rather than incidental, as if when reaching out to grasp him you would always fail, clutching at air while his designs played out across another battlefield entirely.

But it was the Khan’s eyes that moved away first.

‘I will think on it,’ he said.

‘Russ is opposed,’ the Angel said. ‘Mortarion and Perturabo are opposed. Ferrus is opposed. We need allies, taken from the masters of more enlightened Legions. Remain aloof forever, and they will outnumber us swiftly.’

‘Does our Father know of this?’

The Angel shrugged noncommittally. ‘Few things escape Him.’

‘Engagement will not be easy. Already we are committed to more conquests.’

Sanguinius smiled. ‘You will find a way to aid us, if you choose to do so.’

The Khan suddenly looked up at him. ‘You have a name in mind,’ he said.

‘You will take your own course.’

‘Say it, for what it’s worth.’

‘I do not seek to guide you.’

‘Say it.’

The Angel affected nonchalance then, for the first time, and not altogether convincingly.

‘Lupercal’s star shines strongest, all know it,’ he said. ‘To have him as a part of this, to even make the suggestion, if the chance came… Well, it

could not hurt.’

The crew bay of the shuttle back to the *Swordstorm* was a subdued space. The Khan was morose, lost in thought, and his warriors knew better than to ask him what had transpired with the Angel. Yesugei, who had conferred with a Librarian named Kano during a short visit to the *Red Tear*’s archives chambers, sat back calmly in his seat, and looked at Qin Xa.

The master of the keshig was helmless. His face was a bloody criss-cross of wounds and bruises. One eye was swollen closed, and his lip was split.

‘How fared your counterpart?’ asked Yesugei.

Qin Xa grinned. ‘We both walked away. He limped worse.’

Yesugei laughed. ‘Good.’

‘But I liked them, brother. I would like to fight alongside them again, with something at stake.’

For some reason, that thought seemed to trouble Yesugei.

‘It might yet happen,’ he said uncertainly.

After that, though, nothing more was said, and they crossed back to the *Swordstorm* in silence.

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SEVEN

The flyer shot low over the plains, almost seeming to graze the tips of the blue-green grass, sending a long furrow swaying behind it with a hiss and a ripple. It was a single-occupant craft, controlled by two slaved servitor-cortexes, both dumb and mute. Yesugei sat in the bubble-dome rear, watching the empty landscape speed past.

He was not wearing his armour, but had reverted to adapted versions of the clothes he had worn before ascension – a calf-length wool deel, leather boots and a crimson sash denoting his rank and specialism. The flyer's air filters were open, allowing the wind to buffet into the cockpit, making his long black hair flutter around his scarred face.

In the far west rose the line of the Khum Karta mountains, dark blue against the pale of the sky's arch. In all other directions, there was nothing but the whispering knee-high grass, ruffled by the booming wind and churning under the glare of the sun.

So much of it was still as empty as it had ever been. Some worlds had been utterly transformed following compliance, a number of them by the Khan's own hand, but not Chogoris. Only a single pocket of terrain had been altered from its primeval state, forged, raised up and dragged into the Imperium of the Crusade. Out across the vast expanses of *rejke* grass, nothing much else had altered. The nations still fought, cleaving to old ties of honour and oath-making, only now they did so under the watchful eyes of recruiters for the Legion. After the bloodiest encounters, tribal khans had grown used to the tally of bodies not quite adding up, the bravest and the youngest being spirited away as if by ghosts.

A new mythology had entered the crowded Chogorian panoply of gods and demons, that of the *kena avdagh* – those who steal the brightest souls. This event was understood to be the highest honour, and the losses were celebrated rather than mourned. On clear nights, those same tribes might

witness the glowing trails of landers scoring the empty heavens, hauling the taken warriors out of time and experience to fight wars beyond the mortal plane. Fires would be lit across the plains to mark their passing.

They could have been rapidly civilised, those tribes. They could have had compliance teams sent among them, technology given to them, reactor-powered cities constructed for them to live in. Such things had even been discussed, back in the very first days, but the Khan had ruled against it soon after the first substantive discussions with his Father.

‘I know now that this world is uniquely blessed,’ he had said to Yesugei back then, the light of the encounter still reflected in his face. ‘It births the strong without rancour. It nurtures vigour without pride. Nothing must change that.’

The line of mountains drew closer. Their lower slopes were fir-clad and stacked with steep cliffs of grey stone. Cataracts tumbled down broken sandstone shelves, feeding the Orkhon river that wound, lazily, out into the plains. There were hard edges in the Khum Karta range, ridges of ossified granite pushed up from the planet’s mantle, creating spire-pinnacles that tore at the clouds like fingers.

No one had lingered much in those places until He had come – only beasts and those few souls seeking the Test of Heaven had trodden its ice-glazed maze of defiles, shrived by the thin air and perishing gales. Now, uniquely on Chogoris, the mountains had been transformed. Huge foundations had been delved and solidified by hovering Mechanicum terraforming-engines. Walls had been raised, sheer against the already-sheer natural cliffs, buttressed with adamantium ribs and crowned with lascannon emplacements. Sanctuaries had been constructed in the Khitan style, rising one above another until they shot higher into the atmosphere than the naked peaks had done, blasted smooth by the storms and bearing the lightning-strike sigil of the gods.

The monastery-bastion, they called it – at once palace, fortress, gaol and library, the new repository for the V Legion’s entire history, personnel and cultural artefacts. Vast quantities of materiel, supplies and combat records had been lifted down from warships in orbit, reverently checked and marked, then interred in frozen depot-chasms carved into the mountain’s heart. Terran scribes and techwrights were imported, as well as specialists from a hundred other worlds, all of them made to swear oaths of allegiance

to the Khagan and put to work turning the bastion, by then named Quan Zhou, into one of the mightiest citadels in the growing Imperium.

During the most active phase of its thirty years of construction, it was said that the earth shook and the skies heaved, leaving the Khum Karta wreathed in lightning and the skies shot with tongues of fire. The Chogorian tribes fell back behind the line of the Ulaav, their seers frantically consulting the augurs for signs of apocalypse.

They never came back. By the Khan's decree, a cordon was set about the new fortress, sealing it from the roving nations of the steppes, such that only the ascended and their indentured menial cadres dwelt in those halls at the roof of the world. Later Imperial delegations would assume that this was to keep the citadel free of the barbarous habits of the Altak. In fact, the opposite was true: Quan Zhou was isolated in order to keep Chogoris free of the taint of the Imperium.

Thus was the fortress' Khitan title explained: the Forbidden Citadel. No roads led there. No gates opened out onto the lowlands below. It was inviolate, like a mountain itself, only greater and stronger than any natural terrain.

Yesugei watched the walls loom closer as the flyer began to ascend. Parts of them were still unfinished, covered in a thick lattice of scaffolding while the Mechanicum's red-lacquered drones crawled over them. A fifth great landing platform was nearing completion, ready to receive the big crew-haulers that would carry whole regiments of legionaries up to waiting strike cruisers. Pennants bearing the gold-and-red sigil of the Legion fluttered in the stiff breeze, trailing like prayer banners over the pale rockcrete.

The flyer slowed, gliding through the towers and the domes, eventually touching down on a hexagonal platform jutting from the summit of a tall spire. The armourglass bubble folded away, and Yesugei walked down the extending embarkation ramp.

A single portal opened before him, guarded by two warriors of the Legion in glistening ivory plate. As Yesugei approached, the heavy doors slid open, revealing another Stormseer bearing two staffs, both crowned with equine skulls and decked with ritual totems. He was wearing full power armour, and a crystalline psychic hood rose up over his exposed head.

'Naranbaatar,' said Yesugei, bowing, before taking the second staff. As soon as his hands neared the criss-cross patterned wood, threads of barely

visible force snaked between his fingers and the thick bands of metal around the shaft. Both Stormseers were surrounded by an aura like reflected sunlight – a faint quickening of the elements, as if the world became more vivid in their presence.

‘Were you successful?’ Yesugei’s deputy asked, returning the bow.

‘Not this time.’

‘Aya, there will be better days.’

‘That there will.’

The two of them passed inside the spire’s pinnacle. Although Yesugei was far less imposing out of his heavy Mark II armour, something about the way he carried himself gave away the disparity in power between them. Naranbaatar was younger, though he had been a full member of the Legion for twelve years and was one of the Chogorian recruits whose numbers had been steadily growing since the foundations of the fortress had been laid. He had not performed the functions of a zadyin arga within his tribe prior to his ascension – that aptitude had been discovered during gene-surgery – but since then his development had been prodigious.

‘In any case,’ Naranbaatar said, leading his master down a spiral stair cut into the stone, ‘the rate of incorporation may have to slow. The apothecaries tell me they are working far beyond capacity. Perhaps let some warriors live their lives for a little longer before plucking them here, eh?’

Yesugei grinned. ‘Do not let the Khagan hear you say that. It will never be fast enough for him.’

They passed through a second set of doors, moving outside again. A wide courtyard stretched away before them, open to the sky and bordered with plane trees. Long banners inscribed with calligraphic sigils swayed in the breeze. Curls of incense whispered across the stone flags, snatched away by the wind and sent tumbling out over the terraces below.

‘They tell me, anyway, parity will be reached soon,’ Naranbaatar offered.

‘It may already have done so,’ Yesugei said. ‘Recruitment from Terra has slowed, they say. We are not, I believe, seen as a prestige Legion.’

Naranbaatar smiled. ‘Which are, I wonder?’

‘The Thirteenth.’ Yesugei glanced at his protégé with some amusement. ‘Watch that one.’ Then he laughed. ‘How do things progress here?’

They moved towards the western end of the courtyard. Above them rose four slender watchtowers, each surmounted by a golden dome that winked

in the sunlight. An arrowhead of birds flapped lazily overhead, buoyed by the mountains' thermals.

'See for yourself,' said Naranbaatar, gesturing ahead.

A square arena had been cleared at the far end of the courtyard, laid with fine sand and bordered with a low iron wall. At each corner a statue stood, symbolising the four dragon-winds of the Altak. On the far three sides, the ground fell away in steep walls, exposing the promontory spur to the whine of the world's winds.

A single acolyte stood in the centre of the sacred space, clad in white robes. He had the telltale upper-body bulk of a Space Marine, and the ridges of his black carapace were visible under the wrinkles of his tunic. His head was bare and shaved, the ritual scar still livid along his left cheek. He carried a long staff, free of ornament.

Armoured attendants stood watch around the perimeter. Facing the acolyte was a wooden image, man-sized, carved in the likeness of a bird-headed element daemon of Chogorian myth. The two senior Stormseers took their places, and Naranbaatar gestured for the acolyte to begin.

He drew the staff before him, holding it loosely two-handed. He tensed, and the muscles of his arm tightened. His eyes closed, and a line of sweat from previous exertions ran down from his temple.

Above him, almost imperceptibly at first, the wind began to quicken. An eddy broke out, spinning above the promontory, sucking in energy and flickering with pale lightning. The air seemed to shudder, to heat up, to thicken. The sand drummed, shaking into concentric wave-patterns on the stone.

The acolyte lowered his staff, pointing at the image of the element daemon. With his eyes closed, he mouthed ritual words, channelling the pent-up force down the length of the shaft. The build-up was instantly detectable – a burning, spun out of nothing and wrenched into the world of the senses.

With a final clenched-jawed utterance, the acolyte released the holding-ward, and a jet of searing lightning flashed out from his staff's tip, leaping across the space and cracking into the wooden idol. The figure ignited instantly, flaring up in a plume of blue-edged flame. The acolyte span the staff around, freeing a single hand. He clenched it into a fist, and pulled downwards.

The idol blew apart, scattering in a shower of charred fragments. The sand kicked up in a rolling shock wave, spilling over the parapet where it was pulled into gauzy clouds by the fading storm surge. A dull echo of the thunderclap came back from the far cliff edges, gradually fading away as the world's weather reasserted itself. In the distance, the shocked cawing of the birds could just be made out.

The acolyte, breathing heavily, recovered himself. He looked up, bowed formally, and took up the staff once more in both hands.

Yesugei stepped onto the sand and walked up to him.

'Your name, brother?' he asked.

'Borghal,' the acolyte replied, working to control his breathing.

'Zadyin arga in your tribe?'

'No.'

That was the most usual answer. The Test of Heaven, the esoteric rite taken by those who became the shamans of the tribal nations, was usually taken too late for candidates for the Legion, so it was more common to discover physical promise in recruits, and only later detect psychic ability. Those recruits faced the hardest trials of all, their body, mind and soul all tested to the limits of destruction before new strength could come.

Yesugei glanced at the smouldering ruins of the image, looked over the swirl pattern in the sand, then grunted in approval. 'You have learned quickly. Tell me, what do you feel, when you do these things?'

'I do not–'

'You understand me. What do you feel?'

Borghal hesitated. Then he lifted his head to face Yesugei. His brown irises were already lightening, fading to an amber that would one day, if he survived long enough, become gold. 'Power,' he said.

Yesugei nodded. 'Yes. That is the danger.' He placed his calloused hand on the acolyte's shoulder. 'Power is what you already have. We bring you here to leash it. We bring you here to make this thing as natural to you as breathing, and as swift. If that creature had been real, it would have ripped your heart out while you were speaking the rite-words. It is not about power. It is about limitation, and then understanding.'

The acolyte nodded, chastened.

'But the strength cannot be denied,' said Yesugei, grinning at him and slapping his hand on his shoulder. 'You will be formidable. Just stay alive a little longer, please – I would like to see you use that in the Crusade.'

Borghal bowed. The attendants ventured onto the sand to clear away the wreckage, and the two Stormseers moved off, walking back towards the double doors, passing under the sharp shadows of the plane trees.

‘They are getting better,’ said Yesugei. ‘My congratulations.’

‘And yet, when we train them, we do not know where to place them,’ said Naranbaatar. ‘You cannot leave it to the khans. It has been too long since we last argued over this.’

‘And the answer remains the same.’

‘That the Khan must decide. When will that–’

‘He is coming. Soon.’ Yesugei looked at his deputy. ‘He has had years of fighting now. He has seen worlds burning at his hand, a hundred of them. He wishes to accelerate the pace of conquest. This is only a part of what he plans.’

‘I could give him a hundred weather-makers this day. They could level any wall for him. They could rip the galaxy apart.’

Yesugei smiled sadly. ‘If it were that simple, if we were alone in the Imperium, there would be little need for debate, but we are not. The Khagan has his brothers, and there is the distant gaze of Golden Terra. These things must be managed.’ They reached the doors, and the hazy screen of incense became briefly pungent. ‘There is one, calling himself the Lord of Death, who is master of a Legion of terror troops as formidable as any scion of the Throne. I studied his doctrine from afar, admiring some of it, repelled by the rest. He is damaged, I think, but that matters not – we are all damaged, in some way or other, and his effectiveness is not in question.’

Naranbaatar listened.

‘He has forbidden the use of sorcery within his ranks,’ Yesugei said. ‘Purged it. He has a following at the Terran courts, and powerful voices within the Imperial Army have been raised in his support. That should not surprise us. This is, after all, the message of Unity. We are the outliers.’

‘It is only one Legion.’

‘There are others. The Wolves of Fenris, though I do not entirely understand their position, since there are rumours of gifted individuals among them. The tally grows. Though we endeavour to remain isolated, one day we will have to fight alongside all of them.’

Naranbaatar looked back over to the training ground, watching as another acolyte was put through his paces by the instructors. The air began to fizz

again, its constituent parts being stressed beyond endurance by the release of energies from the far side of the veil.

‘We have never looked to others for approval,’ he said.

‘It will have to be settled.’

Naranbaatar shook his head. ‘We should ignore it. Let it pass us by.’

‘Perhaps. That may be what the Khan orders.’ Yesugei looked pensive. ‘But there may be strength in numbers, a way to preserve all this – that is the matter at hand. It is why he returns.’

Naranbaatar thought about that for a moment. The ritual words of summoning drifted over on the air, uttered by the next acolyte in a long line. Just as had happened for millennia on Chogoris, the ways of the weather-maker were being learned, honed, extended.

‘And so,’ he said, eventually, ‘will he meet this Lord of Death, then?’

‘Not by choice.’

‘But he is important to this, or you would not have mentioned him.’

‘I do not know. Truly.’ Yesugei turned back to the doorway, and the lintel’s shadow fell across his face. ‘We are storm weavers, not future readers. Who really knows? It may be nothing, or it may be everything.’

He went inside. Naranbaatar followed him in, smiling dryly.

‘Conclusive as ever, then,’ he said.

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EIGHT

Two days later, the *Swordstorm* entered Chogorian orbit. It was not alone – Hasik's vessel, the *Tchin-Zar*, came with it, as did half a dozen lesser craft. Like most Legions, the White Scars had grown both in numbers and commitments as the Crusade entered its apogee, and the fleet had expanded to accommodate the burgeoning capability of the Khan's tactical forces.

They were the great years. The majority of the Emperor's sons had been located and given command of His sundered forces, and the pace of expansion was faster than it had ever been. The forges of a hundred Mechanicum worlds struggled to supply the Imperium's war hosts with the ammunition they needed, let alone the vessels, the armour and the weaponry. The known galaxy, once a barely charted haunt of terror, was swiftly becoming humanity's realm, compassed by its unmatched numbers, technology and martial organisation. Planet after planet fell, was fortified, made compliant, then made productive.

The White Scars had played their part in this. They had pushed a little further than the others, perhaps, taking on those campaigns that would see them rove far ahead of the main lines of command and control, outpacing the lumbering expeditionary fleets in their zeal to blaze new trails into the distant void. In most cases, they fought alone, and thus developed a reputation for either flightiness or aloofness. They also gained a similar reputation for unreliability, especially within the senior hierarchy of the Administratum. Envoys were sent out from Terra, one after the other, each charged with improving relations with this most frustrating of primarchs, but few even made it to their intended destination, let alone succeeding in their mission. What chance did they have, set against a Legion of wild-riders gifted some of the finest ships in the Imperium, and who remained stubbornly resistant, in all ways, to governance from a centre they had only ever been distant from?

For all that, the worlds continued to tumble, one by one, into the hands of a willing Administratum. Such was the rate of conquest, speculation began to spread across the war fleets on what would happen once there were no xenos left to annihilate. Even those who held such a prospect implausible began to detect a change in the tenor of the campaign. Survival for the species had now been secured, so it seemed. The Emperor, beloved by all, would no doubt unveil the next move in His ongoing plan at some stage, though what form that might take was unknown to all but His closest ministers on Terra.

It was in such circumstances that, as the storm-lashed sun sank below the horizon west of the Khum Karta, the lord of the V Legion returned to his home world, the first such visit for many years. The walls of Quan Zhou were hung with the banners of conquest, each given a calligraphic symbol denoting another world or another culture destroyed. The preserved heads of conquered xenos races lolled emptily from stakes lining the processional avenues into the fortress' central bastion. When the Khan touched down in his hawk-prowed lander, the thousands of Legion warriors undergoing training called out in ritual greeting, sending the massed roar – *Khagan!* – booming out into the turbulent skies.

Even out on the plains of the Altak, where black-curdled thunderclouds were racing and the inhabitants had no knowledge of the galaxy's tribulations, khans lofted their curved blades to the heavens and saluted the fire streaks making the distant mountain ranges glow. The zadyin arga knew. They knew that the world's master was among them again, ordering the pillars of the earth and ensuring the souls of his people would remain unsullied. Beasts were slaughtered that night, and couplings solemnified, and old feuds were laid to rest for a little while. It was not proper to kill in anger on such a night, and nor would it be until they felt in their blood that he was gone again, to wrestle with the powers of the oververse and contest the arch of stars against the element daemons and soul dragons that haunted the realm of the unseen.

As the Khan trod the embarkation ramp and emerged out into the light of a thousand torches, Yesugei was there to greet him.

'Pleased to be back, Khagan?' the Stormseer asked.

The Khan drew in a long breath, pulling the cold air of Chogoris deep into his lungs. The first rain from the coming storm was already beginning to fall, spattering wind-scarred stone and making the mountain's forest

mantle shake and brush. The primarch's battleplate still bore signs of combat yet to be excised by the Legion's armourers, and thick rivulets from the gathering downpour ran down its ceramite curves.

He looked up at the peaks, frost-blue against the gathering storm, and smelled the pine-sharp, moisture-laden air. Both moons had risen in the eastern sky, full and silver, and it made the hurtling clouds look like the bucking spines of equines.

A weight seemed to lift from him.

'By the gods, yes,' he said.

The Legion mustered that night in the Hall of Jasper, a great chamber hollowed out at the heart of Quan Zhou's ceremonial maze. Fires leapt from deep pits placed in the stone floor, sparking from incense and sending multihued plumes of smoke curling towards a high-arched wooden ceiling. Long rolls of crimson silk swung from iron banner-poles declaiming deeds of the Legion in formal poetic screeds. Attendants brought platters of food and drink, each of them dressed in the various garbs of Chogoris' melting pot of cultures – sequined Qo gowns, fur-lined Khitani robes, or Talskar, Kurayed and Mathuli deels and kaftans. Music from moon-shaped lutes drifted across the hubbub of conversation.

The Khan took his place at the high dais, flanked by his captains. Before him lay a wide open space of worn flagstones, each one taken from the old courtyards of Ketugo Suogo's palace – the man Imperial remembrancers had called the Palatine – transported from the eastern littoral and re-set within the mountain fastness of his conqueror. On all three facing edges sat warriors in ceremonial white robes, their faces bronze in the firelight, their salvers piled with near-raw meat.

Two Legion fighters circled one another out in the open, each carrying a blunt-iron blade. One wore a black jerkin, the other gold. Their faces, both marked by the long ritual scar, were fixed in pure concentration. The warrior in gold was a little taller, the one in black a little wirier, but otherwise they might have been mirror images.

The Khan watched them carefully, reclined on a plains-throne smothered in furs, chewing. Hasik, placed at his side, threw back a cup of rosewine and beckoned for more.

The gold warrior moved first, swinging into a strike. The black responded instantly, drawing away and pushing the counter-move. They danced around one another, limbs blurring, blades blurring, two shards of

colour in the wavering blood-light. Each seemed to know the location of the perimeter by instinct, never straying too close but making use of every morsel of space within the prescribed zone.

The fight progressed longer than many that had gone before. The conversations died down; the music faltered and gave out. Soon the only sounds were the grunts of effort, the skidding of leather-bound feet on gravel and the whistle of blades over and under one another. Sweat flew in spatters. When the heavy blades – sparring instruments based on the straight-edged infantry weapons of the Kuzil nation – clanged together it was only for a moment. The contest was to first blood, and was a test of concentration and agility rather than raw strength.

Hasik leaned closer to the primarch. ‘Watch the gold.’

There was little to choose between the warriors, but the practised eye knew what to look out for – a faint edge of decisiveness, of accuracy, a sliver more weight to a blow and a fraction less time taken to recover from a hard parry.

Both warriors fought with commitment, and both were skilful, reservoirs of endurance and resolve. But Hasik was right – the one in gold was just a little further along the arc towards perfection. His opponent began to pant harder, to work harder, straining for some way past the glittering screen of his opponent’s solid defence. They spun around, faster and faster, their heels barely touching the sand. Murmurs of appreciation came from the audience as more time passed without a mistake – the focus was absolute, the commitment total.

Then the warrior in black slipped – just by a hand’s breadth, a short scrabble through the grit, swiftly checked, but it was enough. The gold figure pounced, slamming his opponent’s blade aside and pressing the advantage. A second later, and the black-clad warrior was on his back, his sword loose in his hand, the tip of his counterpart’s weapon pressed against his bared neck.

There was no rhetorical flourish, just a swift flick of the point, searing a line of blood across the defeated fighter’s collarbone. The audience roared its approval, thudding the low tables and raising flasks of halaak to the winner.

The defeated warrior’s muscles went limp. He hauled in great, heaving breaths, his body taken to the limit, his limbs trembling from exertion.

The victor was little better off. He saluted to the Khan, face dripping, looking unsteady on his feet. The acclamation seemed to buoy them both, though, and after a moment he reached down to pull his comrade up from the floor. Their swords thudded to the ground, and they clasped hands firmly at the wrist in the Chogorian style, exhausted.

‘From your Horde?’ asked the Khan.

Hasik shook his head. ‘The Brotherhood of Summer Lightning.’

‘What clan?’

Hasik shot him a sly look. ‘None. He’s Terran.’

For a moment the primarch looked nonplussed. He stared at the warrior in gold, who was staggering over to the nearest table and demanding drink in flawless Khorchin. Everything about him – the way he looked, the way he fought, his poise and his resilience – spoke of a son of the Altak. His skin had the same copper sheen, his hair the oil-black thickness, wrapped in a ceremonial topknot. The old khans sometimes spoke of *ineed* – the kill with cheerfulness, the unconscious fluency of violence – and assumed that only a Chogorian could possess it.

‘What’s his name?’ the Khan asked, intrigued.

‘When he came to us, Luthian. Now he’s ascended, they call him Jubal.’

The Khan shook his head. ‘I would not have believed it.’

‘Remember that first day on Terra?’ Hasik was laughing now, his face flushed from the food and the alcohol. ‘They were like armoured bears. Now we breed them into hawks.’ He grinned, and took another swig. ‘I told them you’d change them. I told them you’d remake them, like you did us. It’s completed, Khagan. We’re all White Scars now.’

The Khan took more drink himself. That had been the objective, set all those years ago. Terran recruits would continue to arrive for decades to come, but they would be in the minority now, slotted into the ancient warrior culture of the plains and moulded around it. That might bring problems of its own, of course, but it evaded the chief anxiety of the early days.

‘We would die out,’ the primarch murmured, remembering the time of transition. ‘That was the risk. That we’d be swallowed. All… *this*, gone. I’ll say this for Him – He didn’t make us change.’

Hasik chuckled. ‘We’re *still* scared of that?’

The Khan looked at him sharply then, as if wondering just what that meant, before seeing it had been said in jest, a query fuelled by rosewine.

Hasik was no longer supplying wholly dispassionate counsel, and his eyes glistened a little more strongly than usual.

‘Keep an eye on that one for me,’ the Khan said, reaching for more meat and watching the golden warrior melt back into the firelit crowds. ‘Find me more fighters like him, and we’ll never have to fear anything again.’

Over the next few days, the monastery-bastion bristled with activity. The presence of the Khan was a rare event and every official and master-at-arms was determined to make the most of it. It was forgotten by some that the primarchs were not only fighters – they were generals commanding immense forces, and their attention was as often consumed by the business of maintenance and diplomacy as it was in open warfare. The administration of Chogoris was something that the Khan reserved the last word on, and so regional governors were given audiences to update him on the ebb and flow of conflict between the tribes, the status of the growing orbital defence grid, the arrangements made to keep off-worlders away from the pristine hinterlands. Mechanicum adepts gave him lengthy discourses on the final phase of Quan Zhou’s armament, and Imperial Army representatives gingerly requested more data on expeditionary fleet forward planning, so that they could do better in their attempts to keep up with the White Scars’ dizzying rate of conquest.

Most of all, there was the development of the Legion’s fighting force to consider. More combat vessels for the Legion were being constructed across the Imperium’s forge worlds, and all would find their way to Chogoris sooner or later. They would need to be stocked with warriors at the peak of their training and overseen by veterans lifted from active-service brotherhoods. The movement of so many legionaries, together with their colossal amounts of equipment and supplies, was daunting, especially for a people who had never prided themselves on the careful keeping of records.

The Khan endured it all for three days, locked within the assembly hall of his new palace, his brows knotted and his fingers drumming on his cloaked knee. On the morning of the fourth day, he rose from his throne, gestured to Hasik and Yesugei, and said, ‘Enough. I forget what this world even looks like.’

They saddled up then, just the three of them, and rode out through Quan Zhou’s northern mountain gate. The heavy rains that had marked the primarch’s arrival had passed over, leaving black earth glinting under a bright sun. The wind never rested, blasting all the way across the Altak and

buffeting up against the Khum Karta’s long scarps. From the high paths, they picked their way down to the grassland below, finally breaking out into a canter that would carry them far from the bastion’s bleached rockcrete parapets.

All three were dressed in the Talskar manner – calf-length deels, leather boots, hair tied back to expose the marker-scar on their faces. A Chogorian aduu was a powerful beast, but even those equines laboured when carrying an ascended warrior, and would have swiftly expired if they had been expected to support the weight of power armour as well. So it was that the three passed out into the west, tracing the old pilgrimage paths towards the Ulaav, just as they had done before the Emperor had destroyed the past in order to create the future.

For a long time they said little, absorbing the familiar smells and tastes on the air. Yesugei had been stationed on the home world for some months by then, but for Hasik and the Khan it was still both always familiar and half-forgotten.

Eventually the Stormseer looked to the skies, prompted by a sudden intuition. Far above, out of sight to all but the sharpest vision, was a faint blot in the empty blue. He pulled up, shading his golden eyes, and the others did likewise.

A raptor circled far above them – a wild hunter, fearless and unchallenged, riding the high airs in wide arcs. Hot air rising from the sea of blue-green tilted it, but its eyes never shifted, locked in perfect stillness as it scoured the earth below for its prey. Slowly, its hunt took it away northwards, spiralling out of even a Space Marine’s visual range.

The Khan watched it go.

‘That’s what they call you now, Khagan,’ Hasik said. ‘The Warhawk.’

The Khan grunted a half laugh. ‘We all have these little names,’ he muttered. ‘Like calling cards.’

Yesugei shrugged. ‘Not a bad one, as they go.’

The Khan rolled his shoulders, flexing the muscles. He was breathing deeply again, more than his efficient lungs demanded, as if by drawing in the world’s air deeper he might hold on to it for longer.

‘Of all that has transpired, of all that we have had to learn,’ he said, the words sounding like something he had long been rehearsing in his mind, ‘the passage of time has been the hardest to master. My fleets engage in a hundred battles – some ships are gone for a month, others for a decade. A

campaign I think will occupy me for a year takes me three, and a promise made in a heartbeat on one world can take a lifetime to fulfil on another. And yet it remains a promise.’

Hasik and Yesugei listened. They were alone in the vastness, the three of them, as isolated and secure as if null fields had been clamped around them.

‘Some things are achieved, though,’ the Khan continued. ‘Our place in the Crusade is no longer in doubt. We have conquered all they asked us to conquer. Now the Emperor’s attention is beginning to move again. Certain old concerns are no longer with us, though others will come to take their place. In the interim, we have a rare glimpse of genuine choice.’ He looked up at Yesugei. ‘I spoke to Horus. More than that, we have fought together, twice now.’

‘So you took the Angel’s challenge,’ said Yesugei.

‘The choice was mine,’ said the Khan. ‘But he was right in one respect – Lupercal and I found kinship, against expectation. He fought in a way I could respect. We will do so again now, though on a greater stage.’ He turned to Hasik, and smiled. ‘The greenskins, noyan-khan, the greatest enemy of our race. We have not hunted them yet, and the time has come to do so.’

Hasik frowned, looking uncertain.

‘You have a concern?’ the Khan asked.

The noyan-khan shook his head. ‘They say the greenskin is a good enemy, but–’

‘They have empires,’ the Khan said. ‘The largest of them rival our own. This is prey after our own heart.’

Hasik nodded, still slowly. ‘Then it will be an honour,’ he said.

‘It will be new,’ said the Khan. ‘The Luna Wolves can learn from us.’

‘If they learn from us,’ said Yesugei warily, ‘we will also learn from them.’

‘That is not something to be feared, is it?’

‘So that is the policy now,’ Yesugei said. ‘To edge out of the shell we have so carefully constructed.’

‘We must give thought to the future,’ the Khan said. ‘To an Imperium without enemies. There are ideas in play, some hanging by a thread. The more I see of the Crusade, the more I see its weaknesses. Confrontation is coming from those fault lines, and I wish to have our allies in place now.’

Yesugei looked uneasy. ‘I understand the desire,’ he said. ‘Perhaps we will give your brother something to consider. I have not met him, though – I have no insight into his ways.’

‘Consider what models he has,’ said the Khan. ‘The remnants of Old Night. The sermons of my brother Magnus, which weary even me. These are powerful dangers, and they are talked of on Terra. To counter them, we must *show* a better way.’

Yesugei hesitated for a moment. Then he bowed his head. ‘I do not know why I resist this. It is unworthy. You are right – we cannot remain isolated.’

‘My instincts were the same as yours, Targutai,’ said the Khan. ‘Let them squabble, let them strive for the ear of my Father, and we would have no part of it. But I have seen the way the argument is flowing now. I have spoken to Magnus, to the others, and heard their case. If we do nothing, and let the loudest voices dominate, they will not suffer us to keep our weather-magic.’

‘They could never compel us,’ said Hasik.

‘Not now, for sure,’ said the Khan. ‘They need us now. But one day, when all this is done?’

He fell silent. The wind boomed around them, pushing the last tatters of high cloud west.

‘I want you to get alongside them, Hasik,’ the Khan said at last. ‘I want you to learn from them, discover how they think. Only by standing alongside a warrior in battle can you know him – do this for me. I will ask the same of Giyahun.’

Hasik bowed.

‘And I?’ asked Yesugei.

The Khan smiled. ‘I have another world in mind for you, Stormseer.’

‘Intriguing. Then it shall be as you command.’

‘But these are not *commands*, are they, truly?’ the Khan said. His face was still as severe as ever, but there was less care etched on it than there had been on Terra, on Hoadh, or on any of the many worlds raided since. ‘We are the heart of it all, both of you here, Xa, Giyahun. By rights we should have died years ago, but then this all happened. The pattern was set, locking us in.’

‘Nothing is eternal.’

‘So you always say. But it is *worth* something, to have brotherhood, here, just as we did in the past. I wonder how much it is the result of my Father’s

design, or if it surprised Him too. I never got the impression He understood such things, but then again it is dangerously easy to underestimate Him.'

He looked away from the skies at last, over the wind-blurred plains. The air was sweet from the rain.

'In any case, eternity is a long way off,' he said. 'Until that changes, we should really learn to enjoy it.'

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NINE

Hasik smashed his closed fist down, striking the monster in its block-shaped forehead and breaking the bone beneath. It didn't die. It roared back, its grotesquely oversized jaw snapping to maul at his wrist, so he punched harder, working his armour's power system close to its limits and wrenching more physical energy from somewhere in his overworked body. It took two more heavy strikes to finally dull the rage behind those unearthly red eyes, then a third to send the enormous creature slumping to the ground and sliding down the trench's inner wall.

Hasik powered on up the slope, scrabbling amid a tide of falling crystal-scree. His left leg was throbbing with a sharp pain that was becoming harder to ignore, his bolter was smashed and his armour riddled with dents and gashes. The air was full of that terrible, never ending roar – the *hain-ghallh* – that came with every battle against these things. The sonic hell swelled and tore against his helm's protective ear-shielding, wearing at his senses and dulling his reactions.

He reached the lip of the slope and dropped heavily to one knee, panting for air. Above him a tortured sky opened up, as orange as nerve gas and scratched with the black contrails of hammer-munitions. A Stormbird growled low overhead, its atmospheric drives spilling thick smoke and making the ground shake. A tumbled terrain of cut crystal spread out before him, flashing from explosions like some continent-wide scatter of broken glass. The Saddleback northern massif rose up against the fiery horizon like a perennial insult, still too far off to assault directly but thumped now by ranged munitions. Everything in-between was in motion, a seethe of moving earth that boiled and crashed like the sea.

But it wasn't earth, and it wasn't sea. This was a living tide, a carpet of dark-green flesh, banded by heavy iron armour and overlaid with the

nightmare roar that had a life of its own and swamped all else under its thickening boom and roll.

Nothing else in the galaxy was like it. No other species could do this. No other sentient lifeform could meld and twist itself into a single amorphous glut of fused and overripened fury, ever expanding and powered by some locked-deep gestalt furnace that only grew and grew until it felt inevitable it would reach out and smother the stars themselves. No other army marched under flickering green-edged pressure waves that split eardrums and shrivelled timid hearts. No other army ran into the clash of blades out of nothing more than primordial instinct, with no other thought but to *feel* the rage and the hot blood spatter, and to gorge on it. There was no deliberative malice there, no thought for wider strategic goals; there was just a will-surge to murder, thrumming up from clotted basal ganglia and boiling through black blood vessels, animating the steel-hard muscle-bundles that swung blunt-edged cleavers like turbohammers and split the ground apart beneath clawed feet.

The *hain*. The ork. The greenskin. Greatest and most numerous of all the xenos threats ever faced by humanity, so perfectly evolved into instruments of violence that Imperial scholars had even postulated the wild conjecture that they had been purposely bred for it. Fearless, incredibly strong, horrifically belligerent, fecund and tenacious, there had never been and would never be – many reckoned – a more deadly enemy.

And now they were on the charge again, roused to apoplexy by previous attacks and faced once more by the spear’s edge of a Legiones Astartes assault.

Hasik was joined on the ridge by his keshig guard master, Goghal, then by more warriors as they fought their way out of the trench lines. Three brotherhoods – over a thousand fighters – cut and hacked and shoved and kicked their way to the tipping point, their blood-soaked progress overshadowed by the thudding boom of Legion artillery pieces. Stormbirds and Thunderhawks hung in the air on smoggy columns of downdraught, pouring heavy bolter-fire into the oncoming hordes.

On the right flank, a column of mobile armour from the 88th Cohort Solar Auxilia trundled out of crystalline cover, shattering glassy outgrowths and opening up from main battle cannons in a rolling, echoing series. On the left flank, perfectly timed to join the combined assault, more Legion warriors in pale ivory battleplate poured up the trench slopes and out into

the open, charging in tight-set ranks and chewing up ground at a ferocious pace. Despite the similar livery, they were not of the V Legion, but the 21st Company of the XVI Legion: the Luna Wolves, led into battle by their captain Galkusa Rheor. The scions of Horus were as battle-worn as their cousins in the ordu, and fought through the pain just as doggedly.

Every metre of ground was taken after exhausting bouts of brutal hand-to-hand combat. Every ork downed was replaced by another, then another, each one swarming up out of the infinite well of bodies that churned and erupted like some vast organic magma well. Bolter magazines clattered empty after perilously brief intervals, and then the hand-to-hand fighting would begin in earnest. Space Marines crunched in face to face with the enemy, power fists and energy weapons snagging with neon disruptor charge. Tanks surged up out of the tangled trench lines, rocking on the uneven terrain and unloading las-beams into an oncoming tsunami of unbound slaughter.

Hasik was running again now, forging his designated path towards the distant Saddleback, lashing out with his glaive in withering circles. His honour guard stayed close, bludgeoning any xenos that weren’t dispatched by the heavy blows from his guan dao, unleashing precious blasts of bolter shells into the swirl of thrown bodies.

Progress slowed. The Legiones Astartes were at their best in fast-moving battles where superior dexterity and accuracy could be brought to bear, while the greenskins prospered where their greater numbers could deaden the vigour of combat. The xenos understood this perfectly, whether by instinct or through battle-cunning learned over decades, and so their onward race into the emptying barrels of the Imperial guns was hardly mindless, but instead played to a dreadful innate strength. In that choked, dagger-edged terrain, their unmatched kinetic energy was unleashed in a lead-heavy wave, and so the contest slowed once more under the wearyingly familiar weight of grinding, punishing attrition.

Hasik, seeing it unfold again, roared in frustration, lashing out with his blade and decapitating a hulking xenos warrior in a single strike. Even before its stinking head had thumped to the earth, three more were lumbering into contact.

‘We will not make the objective, khan,’ voxed the earthy voice of Rheor from a long way away.

There was no condemnation there, just a statement of fact. The combined Legion forces had been prosecuting their exhausting fight against the greenskins for too long to expect any easy victories, and there had been no disagreement about making the attempt to break out of the trench-line salient.

Hasik fought on grimly, driving himself onwards through force of will. His warriors surged with him, but the attack front was becoming ragged. Over on the right flank, the Auxilia armour was slowing down, caught by a vicious countercharge from heavily armoured xenos infantry. Pulverising fire from the swooping air support seemed to do little to slow the onslaught, and even the metronomic detonation of the tanks' main battle cannons only cleaved paths ahead for a few moments before the gaps were filled.

'We will *not* miss the rendezvous,' Hasik growled into the vox, spinning on his heel before plunging the point of his weapon into the chest of a racing greenskin. He only just hauled it out before another one launched itself at him, and thick blades clashing in a welter of thrown sparks.

'Take the secondary target,' Rheor grunted, his voice betraying similarly heavy exertion. The huge battlefront was slowly dissolving into a thousand static engagements. Orks seemingly burst from the ground underfoot, hauled into snarling life and thrown into contention by the omnipresent species-roar that made the crystals resonate, splinter and crack.

Hasik roared back at them, screaming his frustration out. He slashed wildly, severing tendons and slicing armour, gaining a few precious metres before the ranks closed again. The secondary target loomed over to his right – high ground topped by a thicket of translucent geodesic facets; easier to reach than the Saddleback, defensible, but several kilometres south of where he had promised to bring them. The harrowing fighting in the trench network had taken too much out of his forces, and now they were paying the price.

The red sun sank a little further, sliding through turbulent skies towards the jagged eastern horizon. The tips of the crystal forest glinted pink and lilac, glowing from the last of the heat that would soon drain from the air and turn the battlefield into a semi-frozen wasteland.

Goghal caught a heavy blow from a xenos warrior and was sent sprawling, shattering the ground beneath him. Hasik heard screams as an Auxilia tank hatch was breached, its crew butchered as the xenos swarmed inside the shell.

He fought on, head down now, felling the ork that had floored the master of his keshig and shouldering into the next in line. Goghal got to his feet, ignoring the long slick of blood along his breastplate, slaying with an edge of shame now.

But this could not go on. Forward progress was at a crawl, and if it slowed any further the assault risked stalling, collapsing and becoming a massacre.

Hasik ran a visor-overlaid tactical scan for the twentieth time that hour, glancing in a split second over a swinging virtual hemisphere of locator-runes.

It could be done. It could be salvaged. But only at the cost of more precious time.

‘Secondary target,’ he voxed to Rheor, then the same to Marshal Mothe of the Auxilia field command, then to the brotherhood khans under his watch. ‘Repeat – secondary target. All units switch trajectory. We take it before the sun sinks.’

The reaction was instant. Every warrior had been waiting for it, guessing it would come, drilled to respond without hesitation. The Luna Wolves squads ploughed right, sweeping back from their forward positions and pulling away under the cover of shortening mortar barrages. The Auxilia tanks swivelled and powered eastwards, making for vantages picked out in aerial reconnaissance three local days ago. The White Scars maintained their trajectory, pushing along the gore-soaked path that would take them under the lengthening shadow of the rise, but now their aspirations were more limited, and soon their allies would be drawing close in on either flank to cut off any counter-attack.

The orks sensed the change of focus, and their infernal roar ramped up further. The world’s dying light tinged green, a lurid mix with the deepening orange, and they pushed back harder, knowing they had the chance to shatter the attack now. From somewhere deep within their horde, unearthly shrieks pierced the tumult, and lancing strands of glowing emerald danced across the incipient storm.

Hasik crashed into the fray again, swinging his guan dao two-handed. His vision was shaking at the edges now, his muscles throbbing. All that powered him was defiance, a rage almost as blind as that of the xenos who still charged at him, over and over, a rampaging bulwark of maddened flesh that just would not stop.

‘Hai Chogoris!’ he thundered, bitterly, his vox-augmitter briefly sending the battle-cry flooding up against the sonic wall before him.

‘Khagan!’ came the response, briefly immense, briefly dominating, before all was swept up by that devouring sweep of psychic battle-mania.

Hasik barely looked up. Sweat ran down the inner curve of his helm, salty from dehydration. They would make the ridge that night, they would fortify it and they would hold it – that remained within their power. But the Saddleback had been the goal that he had promised his primarch, and that would not be taken yet.

He spat a gobbet of his own blood, tasting it as it ran against the heated metal of his vox-grille. His breathing hammered in his ears, his hearts thudded.

A good enemy.

He remembered saying it eight years ago, as if it were a dream or half-remembered jest, something to be uttered under the sun while all things remained possible.

He fought on, jaw set against the pain, wading through the mire of alien screams that went on and on until madness seemed almost like a release.

Not any more.

The world was designated 4-68-99, though everyone save the fleet’s expeditionary cartographers called it Gar-Ban-Gar, which was as close as human lips could get to what the orks had named the planet in their own debased tongue. Perhaps it wasn’t even their name for it; perhaps their endless chant – *gharra-bhanna-gharra* – meant something else entirely. No one cared any more. Gar-Ban-Gar was what the legionaries called the place when they were not swearing at it, or cursing the hour it was brought into existence, or launching another round of orbital strikes to smash the life out of it and send its glassy surfaces skittering like thrown baubles.

It was the Khan who had determined it would be taken. The stellar empire carved out by the xenos warlord Gharluk compassed fifty worlds, a huge swath of the void comparable in physical scale – if not in culture or accomplishment – with growing Ultramar itself. Some strongholds were mere rocks infested with roving bands of feral greenskins; others were fortress-planets swollen with xenos nests, their rusting parapets crawling with legions of conquest-bloated warriors.

It was still a mystery how the orks had spread so effectively between systems. The creatures used technology of a sort, hulking constructions of

scrap metal and looted parts, ramshackle and prone to catastrophic failure. It was understood that the xenos drifted from sector to sector in great hulks dating back to the dawn of interstellar travel, but how this process was coordinated to a degree sufficient for the construction of void empires was wholly unknown. However, by some means, Gharluk had nevertheless tightened his grip on an entire subsector, maintaining communications between worlds and organising offensive raids across multiple battlefronts. A planet would fall to Imperial assault, only for its defences to be swamped a month later by counter-attacks from a dozen bordering ork-held systems.

So the xenos knew. By some arcane means, they knew how their seemingly anarchic empire was ordered, and what had come to challenge it, and they defended that realm with both ferocity and invention. Early optimism from Imperial Army commanders had long since given way to weary acceptance – the many greenskin empires would not be like the other conquests, concluded in months and followed by triumphal compliance missions. In the early days, there were even those who believed the clash of such closely matched powers might herald the end of the Imperium's expansion, and despaired of the vast resources required to take on such a massive and unending vortex of violence.

But the Legiones Astartes had been made for foes such as these, and finally the xenos defences began to crumble. Attack after attack was launched, smashing sentinel worlds in waves of meticulously prepared landings. It never became easy. It was always bloody, always hard-fought and nakedly vicious. But, slowly, the current of the battle began to turn, and gradually the borders of Gharluk's fiefdom collapsed.

Thus came Gar-Ban-Gar's turn for destruction. The crystalline planet stood at the confluence of warp routes linking a dozen other systems, three of which were already under attack by White Scars forces under Giyahun's command. Annihilating it would negate the opportunity for flanking counter-offensives, crippling Gharluk's ability to project power across the entire subsector. As Horus pushed on towards the ring of fortress planets at the centre, the White Scars would strike their blow here, clearing the way for the inevitable assault on the heart of it all.

Everything was interlinked, a delicate skein of time-critical moves that needed to take place in strict order. Delay here imperilled advances elsewhere. All knew this – the Khan, the allied forces, the Imperial high command, even the orks themselves. Thus, continual progress was of the

essence, one way or the other. For one side, hesitation was fatal; for the other, every extra day gave them a chance to divide their enemies and recover lost ground.

Hasik thought on that as he slumped down to his haunches.

Not fast enough.

The sky was a deep black-red now, drained of all but the last rays of the long-departed sun. Stars scattered vividly across a thin-atmosphere sky, clustered more thickly than on either Terra or Chogoris, the product of a world sunk deeper towards the galaxy's core.

The sounds of battle were still everywhere. Legion forces had taken the ridge four hours ago, and since then every effort had been expended in making the gains secure. The Auxilia's engineers had responded admirably, quickly drawing up mechanised siege engines and pile-driving fixed defence stations into position. Troops held in reserve during the first push through the trench lines were deployed across the ridge's northern perimeter, given Legion squads to stiffen their resolve and charged with keeping the newly won lines impenetrable.

Much of the rest of the Auxilia contingent were exhausted by several days of constant fighting and needed rest. Their tanks were charred and overloaded – power packs flatlining, ammunition chambers empty, their crews slumped across the carcasses of their charges. The orks had not gone away, but even they could not assault forever, and so they hung back out on the open ground, chanting that damnable roar over and over again to banish any sleep the humans might have hoped of getting. From the deeper distance came the roll and boom of metal-skinned drums, and green flickers of psychic force danced in the night's depths.

The atmosphere of hostility never went away. After a while the Imperial troops heard it in their half-snatched dreams, saw it in every stray shaft of livid orange sunlight, felt it in their trembling fingers. Even the battle-hardened felt it. Even the Space Marines.

Hasik blinked away the fatigue, and looked up to see the familiar outline of Galkusa Rheor crunching towards him. The Luna Wolves captain was in a bad way, his right pauldron clawed and hanging off his shoulder, his knee-guards crackling from ripped powerlines.

Hasik rose. Others of the V Legion that were gathered around him saluted wearily, making the aquila in the standard Imperial manner.

‘Foul creatures,’ Rheor said grimly, his thick voice giving away his own weariness.

‘Foul indeed,’ Hasik agreed, speaking in Gothic. ‘Strong, though.’

Rheor activated a hololithic tactical display, and the night air between them shimmered into wireframes. ‘We are three days south of where we need to be.’

‘I know it. Ideas?’

Rheor and Hasik had conferred often during the previous six months of heavy campaigning. The Luna Wolves warrior was gruffer and harder edged, raised amid gangers and renegades, but still an accomplished commander with an open mind and an acute strategic grasp.

‘None from me. You?’

‘Renewed orbitals?’ Hasik offered, without conviction.

Orbital strikes were not a favoured weapon on Gar-Ban-Gar. For one thing, they were phenomenally expensive in terms of resources, which the fleet needed for low-orbit operations against the hundreds of ork-crewed scrap-ships that still plagued them. For another, the world’s unique landscape limited their effectiveness. Most of the terrain was a close-packed mass of huge geodesic outcrops; these translucent crystals were hard-wearing and offered plentiful cover, meaning that the only bombardments capable of causing significant damage required the Legion forces to pull back for several kilometres, giving the orks a clear warning that they needed to go to ground.

In any case, the devastation caused by such strikes made the subsequent advance almost impossible. It was hard enough fighting through the crystal canyons when they were intact; it was far harder when every square metre was choked with tangled, man-length shards of ceramite-piercing crystal debris.

Rheor did not demur immediately. He leaned against the nearest glittering column, and beckoned for one of his troops to approach. ‘If we have to. The *Spite’s Hammer* is within hail range for another twelve hours. But we both know the limitations.’

The Luna Wolves warrior approached. His ivory armour was scrawled in black lines, spidery like thrown ink. A blue symbol – an open book – had been daubed on his shoulder guards. His gauntlets were blackened, as if he’d held them inside a furnace for a long time.

‘This is Jereth,’ Rheor said. ‘Librarian.’

‘I didn’t think–’

‘He studies psychic powers. Doesn’t use them. We’re not bloody savages.’ It was hard to tell if Rheor was smiling under his helm.

‘We’ve analysed the sonic aegis generated by the xenos,’ Jereth said. ‘Again. We know they use it to fortify themselves. We know they have a shaman caste, placed beyond our reach, summoning the effect. The crystals, we think, are being used here as amplifiers. It makes this landscape a particularly troubling proposition.’

Hasik looked at the young warrior wearily. ‘I have snipers deployed to drop any shaman they can lock on to. They have not got close. The hain are not fools.’

‘But you have your own… shamans.’ Jereth sounded almost embarrassed to use the term.

Hasik smiled dryly. ‘And they’re kept busy. Borghal – tell them.’

A White Scars legionary emerged from the shadows, just as battered as the rest. He held a skull-topped staff in one hand, but was careful not to place any weight on it – it was a weapon, not a crutch. ‘We can fight the effect,’ he said. His voice was a soft Chogorian burr, far quieter than the others, and with a deeper accent. ‘But there are thousands in the soul-field, and we are few. That is the problem.’

‘But still, they’re the key,’ said Rheor. ‘Kill the shamans, the field weakens. We’ve seen it before.’

‘They’re getting better at protecting them,’ said Hasik.

‘Then we must become better at killing them,’ said Jereth.

Hasik laughed sourly. ‘Simple as that.’

‘It cannot be destroyed.’ Borghal said. ‘They… *feed* off conflict. Opposition. This world amplifies the effect. We can only resist it, not end it.’

For a moment the rest of them stood silently, saying nothing. The dull crump of mortar fire echoed out from lower down the ridge as the Auxilia kept up its defensive barrage. It was unlikely the xenos would try to assault the ridge that night – the slopes were steep and treacherous, and the dug-in defensive positions would make an attack ruinous. They were happy to wait, out on the plains, preparing and strengthening for the attack they knew the humans would have to make sooner or later.

More boots crunched through the crystal scree, announcing the arrival of the Auxilia commanders – Marshal Enelope Mothe and her tribune Fased

Exandras. Both went helmless, and their drawn faces gave away the toll the attacks had taken on them.

‘My lords,’ Mothe greeted them, making the sign of the aquila, ‘defensive perimeter complete and operational. My thanks for the assistance from your warriors. Without them, this would not have been possible.’

She was worried. Mothe was a decent officer and a tireless soldier, but she was not a Space Marine. Fighting for so long against the blastwave of the orks’ psychic aegis and seeing one’s forces slowly mauled by its constituents would wear away at the strongest of souls. Supplies were low, and the chance of respite zero. The rendezvous at Saddleback had already been delayed, and a further setback could see the armoured units begin to struggle as fuel tankers and ammo haulers were drained dry.

She didn’t ask the question – she was too much of a consummate professional for that – but it was there in her eyes all the same, hovering behind everything she said.

What’s the plan now? When do we move again? Will we survive this?

Hasik didn’t have answers. He looked up at Rheor, and a sour kind of understanding passed between them.

‘Your service,’ Hasik said to Mothe, barely looking at her. ‘Exemplary. I wish I could give you time to recover.’

He looked up, to the north, out into the gathering night.

‘But that would be, sad to say, only slow suicide,’ he said grimly. ‘So prepare your troops. We assault again at dawn.’

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TEN

‘Hasik gave you leave, then?’ asked Xu Han.

‘We devised the plan together,’ replied Borghal.

‘And Rheor?’

‘He does not know. The noyan-khan ruled that only we should take the risk.’

‘A dangerous course.’

Borghal shrugged. ‘We are running short of choices.’

‘Then we do it for honour, zadyin arga.’

‘Or the example.’

‘To refuse the chance, though.’ Xu Han grinned. ‘Unworthy.’

Borghal didn’t smile. He recalled then, just as he had recalled on and off for the last few weeks, Yesugei’s words to him at Quan Zhou, spoken before he had even completed his training more than eight years ago, and yet resonating still as if planted in his consciousness for this very purpose.

It is about limitation, and then understanding.

The western horizon was lightening quickly, a blush of ruby red that would soon swell into orange. All across the northern slopes of the ridge, embattled Legion forces were preparing for another attempt at driving north to the Saddleback. The objective was visible, a humpback of bristling crystals half-hazed by the predawn mists. It looked a long way away, every intervening kilometre blocked by the war host that clustered on the plains, already chanting, already drumming, beckoning them down to begin the carnage again.

Rheor thought there was a weakness on the eastern margin, a slight thinning of xenos emplacements. Hasik deemed that optimistic, but the Luna Wolves had nevertheless taken position there, deploying their remaining Land Raiders and Rhino transports into their familiar spear-tip formation and arranging air cover from Stormbird squadrons stationed fifty

kilometres to the south. The Auxilia would be placed mostly in the rear, their shattered equipment barely able to trundle down the incline let alone contribute, though fifteen of the most intact squadrons had been taken by Hasik to cover his left flank.

That left the centre, the direct line across the plains. The brotherhoods saddled up for this, taking every remaining jetbike and grav-flyer and pressing them into service. Close to six hundred mounts remained serviceable, and now growled and shivered on top of the ridge like thoroughbreds, their smokestacks cracking and their repulsor plates whining up to full power.

Dawn was the signal. Every pair of eyes, human and xenos, flickered towards the west, to the spreading light. The roar was already back up to full pitch, the skies dancing with the first scraps of filmy, emerald fulguration.

Despite his relative inexperience, the heavy losses had made Borghal the most senior of the six remaining Stormseers attached to Hasik's horde. Xu Han was next in rank; the rest were barely out of ascension on Chogoris. For weeks they had been contesting the aura generated by the orks' hidden shaman-caste, thinning it with clustered lightning strikes and driving the full brunt back with their summoned gales. Without those efforts, the Legion forces might still have been locked in the trench lines, but the toll had been crushing. Three of their original contingent were dead, their minds flayed and hollowed by the punishing effort required to go up against the xenos witches. For all that sacrifice, the respite they won from that gestalt harrowing was only ever temporary, a mere lessening of its full destructive power, and not the decisive stroke they needed to break the power of the psychic collective.

They could not get close enough to the origin. They could sense their shamanic counterparts from afar, even catching rare glimpses of them amid the grinding press of xenos bodies, but they could never fight their way to within range of a kill.

The six Stormseers saddled up, mounting the thrumming chassis of Scimitar-class jetbikes. They all wore full armour and carried their staffs one-handed, angling them like cavalry spears. Only their clattering ranks of totems and the more elaborate clan markings on their armour distinguished them from the mass of Chogorian warriors. On either side of them, more squadrons of jetbikes revved and bucked, as if straining for the order to

loose. Out on the plain below, the orks jostled and stamped to get to the front rank, screaming and bellowing. Arcs of green lightning snapped across their tusked heads now, pinging and latching on to the thousands of crystal outcrops and making the hauntingly angular landscape shimmer.

‘Clear your mind,’ voxed Borghal, running through the exercises himself, bringing his psychic sense out of abeyance and into sharp focus. Just as he had every day since arriving on this malignant world, he felt the strange crystal formations humming in sympathy, sucking in the potential and coiling it deep within their reflective depths.

A blush of orange crept across the jagged west, catching on the orthogonal peaks and flashing softly. The roar grew. The front ranks of orks pressed forwards, shoving to gain the lower reaches of the ridgeline. As the light spread, their numbers were revealed again – thousands upon thousands, each of them huge and armour-crusted, swinging spittle-laced cleavers and hauling boxy projectile weapons. There was no end to them. It felt like teetering on the edge of an infinite, endlessly mobile cauldron of psychosis.

Borghal’s helm display glowed with the <standby> command, something every ordu warrior across the long summit would now be seeing.

‘He fights at your shoulder,’ came Hasik’s voxed injunction, sent to Borghal alone.

Borghal nodded. That was true of all of them – even when separated by many hundreds of kilometres, the Great Khan was always at their shoulder, as ever-present as the hawk’s gaze – but the sentiment was appreciated. Hasik was a good commander, and knew what risks were being run in this.

The rune glowed red. Then, in a blink of adjusting retinal substrate, it switched to <enact>.

The battle horns blared, sending augmented audex blasts roaring from the throats of Chogorian *raken* trumpets. The Luna Wolves thundered in turn, kicking down the slope in a fury of dust and blazing vox-augmitters. Bullet-punched standards swung erect, displaying the livery of the XVI Legion, the V Legion, the 88th Cohort and the undying, eternal Imperium of Man whose destiny it was – and had always been – to scour all other life from the stars.

The jetbikes leapt forwards, six hundred of them boosting high on superloaded grav-plates, before their prows dipped and they shot down the incline liked loosed arrows. The sun rose in full, throwing long shadows

back across the tangled crystals, flaring against the ranks of thundering thrusters. Borghal was first away, along with his Stormseer brothers. They hurtled down the incline, swaying around the terrain as it knifed past, keying their heavy bolters, volkite culverins and multi-meltas into juddering life and pulling targeting lines across their cogitator-linked helm displays.

Air support boomed ahead of them, barely fifteen metres over ground level and boosting hard. Twenty Sokar-pattern Stormbirds laid down volleys of lascannon fire, heavy bolter rounds and missile salvos, interspersed with sonic-booming Thunderhawks hammering every sliver of every gap, turning the entire kilometres-long battlefront into a false mountain range of magma-red explosions.

The White Scars shot clean through that fire curtain into the reeling xenos. The Stormbirds above wheeled around for a second pass, while the Auxilia's mobile armour ground its way forwards, keeping its ranged fire just ahead of the cavalry onslaught. The Luna Wolves' mechanised squads hit deep and hit fast, running through rank after rank of greenskin defiance and leaving it sticky and extended across their tracks.

But the White Scars, as ever, were faster. *Faster than thought*, the Khan had always promised – so fast that it addled the senses and shocked the nerves; so fast that as soon as the enemy realised it was being attacked it was already over for them, and the fight had started for the next target in line.

Borghal whooped aloud.

'Khagan!' The roar came from the lips of every fighter. Other Legions might invoke the Emperor, but for the White Scars there was only the lord of the plains, the one who had set them free to do this forever. *'Ordu gamana Jaghatai!'*

They crashed hard into the still-living throngs of orks, driving straight through them in a thrown shock wave of blood and armour shards. The bolter-rain never ceased, ploughing deep ahead to clear narrow tracks between the staggering xenos bodies. Those that survived the firestorm and the projectile hurricane were slashed in two by the glittering blades that whirled and thrust from the riders' expert hands. The sword edges were travelling at an absurd velocity by then, impossible to evade, and the curved tulwars were as hard and sharp as starlight.

In these moments, there was nothing but exhilaration. Xiphon-pattern Interceptors scored overhead, strafing and twisting before darting free of

return fire. The tanks belched shells, the Legion transports fizzed with las-fire and the infantry crunched and smacked its way north.

But the shock could not last. The orks had known it was coming, and had beckoned the impact. They were sent into paroxysms by the violence of it, for this was what they worshipped, the one thing that their sluggish minds could genuinely appreciate and respond to. The flames made them scream with something like joy, the thrown blood and burst organs eliciting only cackles of laughter from those next to face the blade.

They fought back. They surged up to meet the onslaught, grinning from those great tusked jawlines, utterly fearless, completely without hesitation or doubt. They struck riders from their bikes, sending the huge machines cartwheeling. They threw themselves at the tank tracks, blowing them up with messy blasts of looped grenades. They went toe to toe with the Legiones Astartes fighters – cracking blades into blades, throwing iron-bound punches, ramming spikes and gouges into breastplates, head-butting, gnawing, strangling.

Mere minutes into the huge massed charge, the pace of acceleration had already slowed by half. Legion spearheads pushed deeper, but their casualties mounted. The Saddleback remained frustratingly distant, like some gigantic tombstone destined to carry their names.

Borghal sped on, using his bike as a battering ram and riding down those who tried to leap up and drag him from the saddle. His Stormseers came with him, relying on bolter and tulwar to reap their toll of bodies. More than thirty of the Legion's fighters kept close by them, forming a hard knot of jetbikes that scythed through the xenos like a goad twisted into pliant flesh.

'Faster!' roared Borghal, depressing his accelerator pedal another notch and feeling the engines kick. 'No respite!'

Their formation was already far ahead of their supporting infantry. The artillery's mortar arcs were falling a long way behind them, and the Imperial air cover was concentrated towards the main battlefront. In a few more seconds, they would be beyond help entirely, their dazzling charge cut off by the encircling bulk of xenos.

They kept going, enduring explosions and bike losses and ruptured drives. They took more hits – more jetbikes upended and swiftly devoured by the swarms, their carcasses bouncing and disintegrating before they shattered across the crystal towers.

Borghal never even saw them go. He leaned forwards in the saddle, oblivious to the percussive growl of his bike's overheated bolters, oblivious even to the movements of his own dancing sword-hand. His every conscious effort was bent towards the origin of the hain-ghallh, the crushing psychic wave that made every assault as stifling as flying into the heart of a hurricane.

For a few horrific moments, it seemed as if their trajectory had been wrong, that the augurs had lied and the xenos shamans were placed further back in that seamless mass of bodies. Borghal maintained his ferocious pace, running down another ironclad brute and eviscerating a second with a slice of his curved blade. His brothers matched his speed and held formation, still committed to the same velocity and trajectory.

Then he sensed it. In his mind, he saw the originators of the psychic roar – the wizened, withered beasts clad in stinking robes, whirling their emaciated bodies around in frantic ritual movements, croaking out unintelligible words and pulling fresh mania from the skies.

'I have it,' he announced, changing direction a fraction to drive closer in. The rest of the bikes came with him. Every Stormseer stowed his blade and reached for his staff, and their slipstreams crackled with silver streaks of pre-detonation energy. The escorting warriors, down to twenty now, pulled up around them, protecting them from the orks with their own bodies.

Closer, closer, closer.

The press of xenos grew worse, a physical block of green hides that thudded into and slowed the assault. Once a bike was slowed it was vulnerable, the orks able to leap on it and smash the rider from the mount, so the White Scars kept on pressing, weaving and diving through the living terrain.

Borghal's mental image clarified – he perceived the shamanic chorus now in their full trance state, their bodies consumed by the living aether, their hearts pounding and their adrenalin levels raging. He saw them gorge on the resonating power in the faceted land around them, drinking it in and vomiting it out again. The sheer volume of that discharge was incredible, fuelled by the sympathetic harmonics of the crystals and earthed into the rage of the xenos themselves. It was immense, titanic, a tidal wave of mindless force that dwarfed anything the Stormseers could summon or contest.

It is about limitation.

Borghal’s jetbike skidded to a halt, smashing aside a whole swathe of greenskins as it kicked into the long slide. The other Stormseers did likewise, but the escorting warriors overshot, driving the orks back and clearing a small patch of open space in the midst of the horde. The xenos raged back instantly, hammering at the fragile barrier set up by the White Scars legionaries, but for the moment the Stormseers existed in a small bubble of calm, ringed on all sides by their guards and the xenos war host beyond them.

‘*Nemaghd,*’ commanded Borghal, and the Stormseers raised their staffs towards a single point. Energies immediately crackled around them, turning as green as the lightning bursts that flickered across the entire landscape.

The orks hurled themselves at the protective line of warriors, forcing them back, but for a few precious moments they couldn’t smash their way through. The Stormseers remained motionless within the circle, ramping up their power, channelling the superabundant aether into spinning vortices of physical energy.

It did nothing to dampen the xenos rage. If anything, the aura of violence increased, rearing further and churning more wildly, and soon the truth became apparent – the Stormseers’ intervention was bolstering it, feeding into it, shoving more fuel into an already thundering furnace. The more the Stormseers channelled and amplified, the more the skies raged green and the apoplexy increased. The xenos’ wrath became truly apocalyptic, breaking its flimsy bounds and descending into wholly unfocussed savagery. They began to attack one another, to mutilate themselves, fighting anything within an axe’s range, whether it be the enemy or their own kind.

Borghal gripped his staff tight, feeling sweat spike on his forehead. His psychic hood flared with heat, digging into his flesh like fish hooks. He could feel his consciousness slipping, the edges of his vision becoming blurred, but still he poured on the power, letting it surge through him like a river.

He could perceive the shamans still, too far away for his physical eyes but now well within his mental compass. They were screaming from a sudden fear now, aware that the forces they had summoned were running out of control, but unable to reel them back in. Their lips were drooling with blood, their eyes weeping, their capering desperate and jerky, as if they were being yanked by invisible chains.

Their psychic discharge kept on mounting. The Stormseers goaded it, whipping it onwards like a dumb beast, forcing it into becoming the stampede that would smash its bounds and rip apart the souls who had summoned it into being. The greenskins' only true weakness – their lack of discipline – was now the thing that was killing them; once provoked into an overload, they had no way of hauling it back in.

'More,' uttered Borghal through a tight jawline, screwing his eyes closed and ripping further through the veil between the worlds. He became dimly aware of one of his brothers collapsing, and of the deranged orks rushing the fragile defences around him, and of the tug on his own soul from this reckless headlong charge into psychic excess. *'More.'*

The first greenskin shaman expired, locked into a rictus of agony, its long fingers trembling as it dropped its own clattering staff. Another fell to the ground, blood fountaining from its eyes and mouth, clutching at its foul pot belly as the robes around it ignited. A third spasmed uncontrollably, its jaw cantilevering open and gushing raw aether-matter. They were being snuffed out like candles, turned into husks by the netherworld burning through their veins and arteries.

The orks' psychic aegis was breaking. Huge crystals shattered, blown into fragments by the whirling torrents, showering the figures still fighting under their shadow. For the first time since hostilities had commenced, the orks wavered, their unshakeable psychic aura ripped away like a ship's sail caught by a storm.

Borghal fell to his knees. Xu Han was already out cold, drained by the effort. The rest of the Stormseers were fading fast, toppling from their mounts and sliding into stupor. Borghal fought to keep alert. His staff dropped from his fingers, smoking like an ember. Now was the moment of greatest danger. They were far from their own kind, lost in a sea of soul-crazed xenos, their entire strength spent on triggering the wild chain reaction that had only amplified the ferocity thrumming around them.

He shakily drew his blade, pushing himself back to a half stand, trying to focus. The world swung around him, blurry and fractured. He saw a white-armoured fighter go down at last, ripped apart by a red-eyed monster with a gunning chainsword, and knew that he would be next in line.

He rose up, bracing for the impact, and saw the creature lope at him, huge and ponderous, as if locked in some chrono distortion. He knew he was too weak to fight it off.

He could grin, though.

‘We *broke* your witches,’ he spat out, just as the chainsword revved in towards him.

The impact was horrific, nearly ripping his tulwar from his grip and sending him staggering backwards. The monster’s breath was overpowering, a mix of meat and blood and frenzy, and its massive chainsword hauled round to cleave his head from his shoulders.

Somehow he parried, slapping the incoming strike away, but it nearly ripped his arms off. He detected more figures closing in on him – just smears of colour against a tilting world – and backed off, wondering how much time he’d bought Hasik’s forces.

The ork lunged, smacking Borghal’s blade clean away and driving the whirring chainsword teeth into his right pauldron. He felt the line of agony bite, and heard the clatter of armour shards against his helm. He punched out, trying to connect, and a gush of hot blood cascaded against his visor, blinding him.

He staggered, trying to right himself. When his vision cleared, he saw the ork still looming over him, huge and banded with glistening muscle, reeking of fresh slaughter.

Its head was gone. The stump of its neck was glossy with sinew, a ragged blast crater made by a single bolt-shell. The xenos body teetered for a moment before it finally crashed backwards, the still-snarling chainsword flying loose from its grip at last.

Borghal turned to see Hasik mounted on his hovering jetbike, his armour plastered in long red streaks and his bolt pistol raised. More Scars were arriving in his wake, and in the distance he could just make out the approaching grind of tank tracks.

‘You’re still needed, zadyin arga,’ the noyan-khan said, reloading his spent bolt pistol. ‘Can you fight on?’

Borghal blinked hard, trying to clear his head. His staff was gone, burned to cinders by the release of weather-magic. His body felt light, as if he might be dissipated by a gust of storm wind. All around him, his comrades were either prone or on their knees, but fresh reinforcements were arriving now, slamming into the newly confused ork lines and driving them back.

The change in the air was palpable. The pressure wave of madness had been banished, blown out through overload. They could win this now. The

orks still fought, but without the incredible collective zeal they had displayed while locked within the hain-ghallh. Now they could be broken.

Borghal reached for his blade and took it up. His temples throbbed with savage levels of pain. Two of his Stormseers were still not moving. He could barely pull in a breath, barely stand, barely even see.

He shot a broken smile towards Hasik.

‘With joy, my khan,’ he said, bowing unsteadily before staggering back to his jetbike.

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ELEVEN

They reached the Saddleback that night, breaking the spine of the intervening xenos army during the long advance. As the sun fell again, they set up camp on the higher ground, bringing north all that could be pulled intact from the ridge. They left behind a landscape of thoroughbred destruction: twisted carcasses of vehicles smouldering under the fading light, gouged earthworks, row upon row of rotting bodies.

Many long hours of labour lay ahead. The Auxilia's troops marched up the flanks of the redoubt in weary lines, ready for the back-breaking work of constructing defence emplacements. Kill teams were assembled to strike out back across the battlefields, hunting down the last knots of resistance. The orks could not merely be defeated – they had to be exterminated, the bodies incinerated and all trace of contaminated weaponry destroyed. Thunderhawks hovered over the darkening terrain with banks of neon-bright searchlights, sweeping the burning land like carrion crows.

Hasik stalked through the palls of ash, his guan dao black with blood. His armour had taken more damage and now looked half-destroyed, a collection of cracked ceramite plates hanging from his frame. He was one of the last to make it to the sanctuary of the higher ground, having remained where the fighting was thickest for longest. Only when the victory was secure did he at last turn away from what had become rank slaughter.

Rheor waited for him, flanked by his retinue of warriors. They were as battleworn as he, and the Luna Wolves captain's helm had been lost somewhere in the fighting, exposing his pale-skinned face.

Hasik saluted wearily.

'What did you do out there?' Rheor asked. His tone was measured, but something infected it – irritation, perhaps.

Hasik laughed, a hack that coughed up speckles of blood onto his vox-grille. 'Killed the witches,' he said. 'What we needed.'

‘How?’

‘Our Stormseers. Bloody savages.’ Hasik laughed again.

‘You should have told me what you planned.’

Hasik reached up, unscrewed his gorget seal and lifted his battered helm. His revealed face was criss-crossed with bloody weals from the impacts that his damaged armour had only partially blunted.

‘You share in the honour of this night, captain,’ Hasik said, earnestly. ‘We will make the muster at the Bloodmaw, and I shall tell the Khan of your deeds, who will tell your primarch. But even Borghal did not know if his art would work in this. If it had not, you would not have been drawn into shame. Only us.’

Rheor didn’t look placated. ‘Always shame, with you. Oaths and shame. You people are a strange breed.’

‘But you see the power of weather-magic now? You tell your Librarian of this?’

Rheor drew closer. ‘Once unlocked, these things cannot be put back. You jest, but there are better ways.’

‘We’d still be fighting now, out there. More dead before the end. Maybe we never make it at all.’

‘You should have told me.’

‘Would you have agreed?’

Rheor held his gaze for a while longer. His dark eyes glittered under the lines of fatigue. All of them had been fighting for a very long time.

Eventually, he sighed, and gestured for his retinue to move off. ‘A strange breed,’ he muttered, turning and making for where the defence towers were being hoisted into position.

‘You fought well!’ called Hasik after him emphatically. ‘These things will be known.’

Rheor turned, and a half smile, almost exasperated, flickered over his hard features. ‘Do not shout too hard about your magicians. Not all ears are as friendly as mine.’

Then he was gone, marching off into the gathering murk to order what remained of his forces.

Hasik turned to Goghal, as ever standing by his side.

‘He had a point,’ Goghal observed. ‘That was a risk.’

‘So it was.’ Hasik didn’t look sorry. ‘One we were bred to make. The Khagan would have done the same.’

‘They say he’s closing on the Bloodmaw now.’

‘Then we had better lose no more time. I want us there in three days.’

Goghal smiled. ‘Is that achievable, noyan-khan?’

‘It is essential,’ said Hasik, wiping the blood from his brow and turning away from the dying sunset. ‘He gave me an order. I intend to keep it.’

Immediate onward movement from the Saddleback was impossible. Even an army as self-contained and resilient as the Legiones Astartes needed time to recover after a major engagement – armour had to be replaced and repaired, vehicles had to be overhauled, ammo replenished and supplies restored. Airdrops from cleared areas in the far south were the main route for this; atmospheric transporters were sent lurching over the crystal fields, escorted by wings of protective fighters. Even passing over regions nominally scoured of xenos was a dangerous business. Ork gangs remained in the wilds, fragments of the once-mighty war hordes armed with rocket launchers and erratic missile batteries, so the Imperial high command was wary of sending more convoys than it had to. Not until the last of the greenskin remnants, persisting between the old trench lines and the Saddleback, had been annihilated did the request for immediate resupply receive its answer, and the convoys of cumbersome lifters steadily take off and pull north.

The seized redoubt itself had been heavily fortified by the time the first of them arrived, and fully laden transports touched down on hastily levelled dropsites. Both the Auxilia’s engineering corps and the Legion’s own Techmarines were adept at raising battlefield structures in extremely rapid time frames. Less than twelve hours after the Legion’s front ranks had gained the Saddleback, the summit of the peak was crowned with over twenty fixed air defence towers, more than a kilometre of razor wire and staggered bluffs of tank defences. Earthworks ringed the high places, thrown up quickly by Auxilia mechanised teams and subsequently reinforced by dug-in squads of defenders.

During the long night, patrol squads roved back across the conquered terrain, trawling for the living wounded as well as hunting for any residual enemy presence. The most assiduous of these were the Apothecaries of the two Legions, who passed through the still-hot earth searching for Space Marine fallen in order to extract priceless progenoid glands and mark the bodies and their armour for honourable recovery.

Dawn illuminated a drear landscape of fractured crystal and slowly rotting corpses. Gar-Ban-Gar's sun was hot, accelerating the decay of the thousands of broken bodies, human and xenos alike. Once the Legion squad captains had given the all-clear, incinerator teams from Marshal Mothe's reserve descended to the plain level, their flamethrower-armed dozers grimly shovelling up the slain for the pyres to come.

It took until mid-morning before Borghal was able to rise from his medicae slab and survey the scene. His entire body hummed with pain, mostly concentrated behind his eyes and in the palms of his hands. Usage of the arcane path left its wounds, all the more acute at the points where aether-matter left the body. The fighting following Hasik's relief of the Stormseers' position had still been vicious – the orks may have lost their overarching psychic aegis, but they were still creatures of savage instincts, still capable of immense feats of physical strength and born without conventional notions of fear. Many legionaries had died in the combat that followed, and the cadre of Stormseers under Borghal's command had shrunk down to four.

Despite that, the gamble had been worth taking. A flaw had been detected in the xenos' use of psychic power, one that could be exploited again in coming battles. The orks operated, it seemed, entirely blind to the subtleties of the hidden realm, summoning up breathtaking power when gathered in vast numbers but not displaying any profound understanding of what they were doing. It was as if they were attuned to the energies beyond the veil in a purely instinctual sense, tapping into it like an animal might, either ignorant or uncaring of the deeper metaphysics at play.

Perhaps there was indeed a kind of strength in that. All zadyin arga knew of the temptations of the other place – the urge to keep delving deeper, uncovering more with each encounter, until it became an addiction that risked addling your mind. No greenskin would have been prone to that. That was something to reflect on, given the widely held view that these xenos were not an entirely natural product of galactic evolution. No doubt Yesugei would have had something to say about it, had he been there, but no one knew where he was save the Khan himself.

'Stormseer.'

Borghal looked up, placing a hand on the nearest crystal outcrop to steady himself. The Luna Wolves Librarian Jereth walked towards him, emerging through the crowds of V Legion apothecarion staff as they hurried

from one medi-station to the next. He seemed to have been outfitted with replacement pauldrons, but otherwise his armour displayed the ubiquitous marks of combat. His exposed face was lean, his hair long and dark. Like all the Cthonians, he displayed a mix of aspects – a certain raw brutality, combined with an undeniable dignity of poise. They were born warriors, the Luna Wolves, but of a markedly different, less straightforward heritage than the sons of Chogoris.

‘Librarian,’ Borghal said in greeting, working to keep the exhaustion from showing in his voice.

Jereth stood before him. ‘That was a powerful thing you did. I’ve never seen the like. We should talk more of it, you and I, when you are recovered.’

‘I did not think you… approved.’

‘I neither approve nor disapprove. I study. We’re all learning.’

Borghal looked at him carefully, then nodded slowly. ‘You have the gift, then,’ he said.

Jereth didn’t answer at once. He walked past Borghal to the edge of the crystal outcrop where the view of the battlefield was more complete. Another airdrop was coming in, its engines trailing long lines of grey.

‘There’s plenty I don’t understand about how this Crusade is constructed,’ Jereth said. ‘I don’t understand why so much has been left unsaid that should have been made plain. Maybe you don’t care about such things. Your people do not seem to be the anxious kind.’

‘Do not be sure of that,’ Borghal said, remaining where he was. ‘There have been disagreements.’

‘I fought once on Morfeda,’ Jereth said. ‘Heard of it?’

Borghal shook his head.

‘A human world. A lost human world. They failed to heed the call to join the Imperium, and so it was a forced compliance. Messy. I do not like killing our own kind. But we were not alone, and in that there were some interesting experiences. We fought alongside the Thousand Sons of Prospero, although their primarch did not lead them. Have you ever served with the Thousand Sons?’

‘No.’

‘A fascinating Legion. There was a rumour that they use mind-weapons like other Legions use bolters. I heard stories – a captain, or whatever rank it was, dissolving an entire wall with his outstretched fist. I heard reports of

others levitating in order to reach vantages, or creating translucent shields to ward their battle-brothers as they advanced. Such things. In this time, such things.'

'I have heard similar stories.'

'No doubt,' replied Jereth. 'But then I myself saw something else, and it stayed with me for a long time. I saw one of them, right in the thick of the fighting, and he was slaying like I have never seen, before or since. Even my troops were captivated by it. But then something went wrong. He stopped. We heard screaming, and I will swear to you it was not like any human scream I have ever heard. I saw his hands reach up to his helm, and then his own kind took him up, hiding him from view, and they withdrew from the engagement and pulled back to their own support positions.'

Borghal listened warily. There was something in Jereth's tone that gave away a deep and long-nourished antipathy.

'After the fighting I raised the matter with my captain. Rheor took it up with the Fifteenth Legion command. We made our feelings clear. You can understand why – we were jointly assaulting a position, and for our allies to withdraw without reason or warning risked the success of the entire operation. We heard nothing. We were given no explanation. The next day, the Thousand Sons left. It was not a large detachment, but the loss of it was hard to make up at short notice. It led to significant bad feeling, which I understand went all the way to the primarchs. Even now it is talked of.'

'I imagine so.'

Jereth turned back to face Borghal. 'What do you make of it?'

'I know not. I was not there.'

'He was a sorcerer, they said. Something happened.'

'Any warrior may be lost in combat.'

Jereth smiled thinly. 'If one of my warriors dies, we do not withdraw the entire squad. You would not do it either. Unless, that is, you had something to conceal from your allies.'

'I was not there,' Borghal said again.

'No. But you were here.' Jereth lost his smile. 'Your commander did a dangerous thing. Rheor has equable humours, but does not enjoy being deceived. These things do seem to go together – mind-weapons and deception.'

Borghal began to lose patience. 'Say what you came to say.'

Jereth spread his hands. ‘I only make the comparison. You cannot expect trust to be maintained like this.’

Borghal’s eyes narrowed. ‘It was done to hasten victory. We were already too slow.’

‘This obsession again.’

‘We did nothing different to what we had been doing for months. Only its direction was changed. There is no ban in the Legions on the use of these weapons.’

‘Yet.’

Borghal stopped dead.

‘I jest,’ Jereth went on, smiling briefly again. ‘But I mean what I say about clarity. These things should be made plainer.’

‘It is plain to us.’ Borghal pushed clear of the crystal column, standing unsteadily.

‘Is it? Or do you just ignore them, hoping wiser souls will do the work of looking into it for you? Do you hope that your example alone will somehow make you less hated?’

Borghal’s heart rate picked up a fraction, the first and faintest preparation for battle. He felt his fist unconsciously and habitually reach for his staff, even though it had been destroyed and he would have to wait a long time for a newly fashioned one.

Then Jereth turned away. ‘Not the best time, perhaps. You’re wounded. Like I say, when you’re recovered, we should talk more.’

Borghal took a step towards him, feeling his blood pump strongly around his body. He was angry now, and that accelerated the healing process.

‘There is nothing to talk about,’ he said, voice low. ‘If you turn your back on a weapon, do not be surprised if it cuts you. I care not about Prospero’s witches. I care not about your studies. I care what the Khagan orders. If he tells us to stop, we stop. If he tells us to continue, we continue. That is all.’

‘And the Imperium?’ asked Jereth. ‘What of that?’

Borghal looked him direct in the eye. ‘As you say – neither approve nor disapprove.’

Jereth laughed, seemingly with genuine amusement. ‘Very good. Your Gothic’s getting better.’

Out on the plains, the first pyres of the slain lit up with gouts of promethium, and acrid palls began to spread over what had once been pristine crystal fields. The air shimmered even further into a deep red glow.

‘Be careful, though,’ Jereth said. ‘Much as you might wish to be, you are not alone. You’ll never be alone again. There is more to this than the lord of the plains.’

The smoke rolled upwards, boiling from the heaps of flesh like sacrificial offerings. Borghal smelled the stench but did not look at its source. He remembered the clean air of Quan Zhou, and the blue skies that stretched into eternity, and the clean kills, and the laughter.

‘For you, maybe,’ he said. ‘For us, there will never be anything else.’

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TWELVE

A day later, and the army was ready to march again. As they had done after every advance over the previous months, a garrison was left at the Saddleback to keep the landing sites secure. In due course more troops would arrive, redeployed from the established southern bases to properly fortify the gained ground and prevent any counter-attack. Huge areas of Gar-Ban-Gar were now overlooked by these fortresses, a network so large that from orbit it could be used to trace the original attack trajectories. Over time each garrison had become a towering citadel of rockcrete and adamantium, their prefabricated walls landed from Imperial Army transports and their guns hoisted up to standard template parapets. The greater part of those garrisons was made up of the Auxilia regiments, though most had a skeleton Legion presence and access to rapid-response networks. As on all conquered worlds of the campaign, the vice of control had to be applied methodically and rigorously.

For now, though, the bulk of Hasik's army made its way north in a long-strung cavalcade of transports and grav-lifters. The brief pause had been only sufficient to do the minimum required to make the detachments battleworthy again. The Legiones Astartes forces were better off in this respect, designed as they were for almost continual conflict and immune from all but the worst effects of long-term fatigue, but the Auxilia were being tested hard. It was good, then, that the warzone they were headed to would be the last scheduled for this world. Hasik pushed them onwards not out of spite or hubris, but because they were needed for the final confrontation, the one at which all other major landed contingents were expected to play their part.

Thus did the net close, steadily and grindingly, around the last xenos stronghold. It had been christened the Bloodmaw, partly as a dark jest, and partly in no-doubt mispronounced imitation of what the orks themselves

called it. The Legion fleet's attached Mechanicum terraforming adepts postulated that the complex was the extinct crater of some enormous volcano. It stretched more than fifty kilometres from side to side at ground level. Below that it plummeted rapidly, thickly clustered with crystal growths that became steadily redder the lower one went. So had the name Bloodmaw quickly gained currency, for that wound in the world's crust resembled nothing so much as some colossal blood-soaked mouth, replete with its thousands of jagged teeth.

The orks had colonised that place more intensely than any other site on the planet, using the remnants of the void-going craft that they had smashed into the planet's surface to construct rudimentary fortifications, forges, food-processing chambers and whatever else their debased race required to survive. What vehicles they still retained – rickety attack bikes, half-trucks, looted Army tanks and barely operational junk fighters – had been pulled back under the shadow of the Bloodmaw's inner curve walls. Their remaining strength resided in their still formidable infantry numbers, and the best armoured and most physically imposing orks gathered amid the incarnadine facets, many in heavy plate armour and bearing huge chained-ammunition projectile weapons.

In the years or decades since the greenskins had first come to this world, they had built heavily within that enormous bowl, slowly accreting patched towers and sagging walkways and clawed-out galleries like some colossal swarm of insects. There was no grand design to that construction, just a slow and mindless build-up of straggling structures that had gradually filled and choked and silted up the entire depression, turning it into a honeycomb of iron, stone and strange luminous fungoid growths. As the war had turned against them, the orks had fortified every last inch of it still further, setting up cannons at the many mouths of the labyrinth within and stuffing the tunnels with gangs of grunting, jostling warriors. By the time the combined Legion and Imperial Army forces encircled it, the place was audibly swollen with life, bursting at its ragged seams, a spore-frothed cauldron of close-packed, stinking defiance.

Four separate armies converged on the site, linking up in an encirclement planned months previously on the command bridges of distant starships. From the north came the main detachment of Luna Wolves troops, led by Hastur Sejanus of the Legion's Fourth Company, accompanied by the 92nd and 15th cohorts of Solar Auxilia. From the east came forces recently

landed from off-system, led by Giyahun and comprised almost exclusively of the battle-hardened White Scar brotherhoods that had been prosecuting the campaign on Gar-Ban-Gar's subsidiary worlds. These columns linked up with the greatest of all the war hosts, that led by the Khan himself – a huge conglomeration of V Legion assets and subordinated Army regiments that had burned its way fastest of all from the initial landing sites far into the mountainous east. The final element to arrive was Hasik's own, pushing hard to make the muster before the order to advance was given.

Those combined forces, a vast array of ivory-clad war machines and infantry contingents, arranged themselves in a wide circle, blocking access to the Bloodmaw from all sides. Once the artillery trains had been hauled into place, heavy bombardment commenced, peppering the outer rim with incendiaries and mortars. Overflights of Legion bombers hammered the central regions of the enormous complex, knocking out the main banks of anti-aircraft fire and smashing the last of the flightworthy ork fighter craft. Soon the entire bowl was aflame, sending a towering haze of dirty black smoke curling above them, so vast that it looked like some grotesquely proportioned pillar joining earth to sky.

The initial barrage lasted for more than six hours, pulverising the ground so completely that sections of it cracked and reformed as soot-stained glass. The target was so large that even orbital lasers lanced down into its centre, scything through the accumulated networks of bridges and chambers and gouging great pits deep into the Bloodmaw's heart.

But ranged fire could only accomplish so much. The complex was vast enough and subterranean enough that the xenos could shelter within it almost indefinitely. Bitter experience had taught Imperial tacticians that the only way to be sure of a greenskin kill was to cut it down at close quarters, for they had been known to crawl out of bombsites and rad-zones almost intact. So it was that the Khan assembled his captains in a shielded command bunker less than ten kilometres from the first artillery emplacements in order to give his orders for the final, and necessary, ground offensive.

More than thirty of the combined field commanders attended, almost all of them Legion khans or captains, and more than two-thirds from the White Scars. Sejanus was the senior Luna Wolves officer, a tall and imposing figure with silver eyes and a solid bearing. Qin Xa, Hasik and Naranbaatar

were present also, and when Giyahun entered the chamber the three of them burst into smiles of unfeigned happiness.

‘He returns at last,’ Hasik said, in Khorchin, reaching out to grasp him by the hand.

‘In time to end this thing,’ Giyahun grinned. ‘Even I tire of it now. I have not eaten good meat for too long.’

‘There are more worlds to conquer yet,’ said Qin Xa flatly.

‘I think we can leave those ones to you, brother,’ said Hasik.

‘Do not jest,’ warned Giyahun. ‘He would take the challenge.’

Then the chamber’s doors slid open again, and the laughter died away. All turned towards the portal and bowed.

The Khan had to stoop to enter. He was arrayed for battle, his gold-edged armour glinting under the bunker’s sodium lumens. Unlike all others assembled there, there was hardly a mark on his battleplate. In another commander that might have been looked on askance, as if he had not sought his fair share of hard fighting, but none were foolish enough to believe that – a primarch was made such that even getting a weapon close to him was an achievement; landing one was another matter entirely.

‘So here we are again,’ the Khan said, addressing them all, with a wry smile, in his deeply accented Gothic. ‘Another world on the cusp of falling.’ He glanced at Sejanus. ‘I am glad to see you here, captain. You have done honour to my brother, for I know your road was hard.’

Sejanus bowed. ‘The honour was ours, lord,’ he said.

‘And Hasik too,’ the Khan noted. ‘Last, as ever, to make a muster.’

Hasik bowed. ‘We had some trouble with the shamans, Khagan.’

‘Solved now, I understand.’

‘We found ways.’

‘Good. All should learn from them.’ The Khan looked up, then swept his eyes across the crowded chamber. ‘We know this will be hard fighting. The hain never make it easy – this is their world, and they will not lie down and let us take it from them. Admire them for that. I do.’

All listened. The Khan never raised his voice; he spoke as he always did, in that almost lazy, solidly anchored timbre. He had never had to roar his commands – for him to breathe them was enough.

‘There is no great art or cunning that could take this place without bloodshed,’ he went on. ‘Even if there were infinite time, which there is not, we could not starve them out nor bleed them from a thousand choice

cuts, so we will reach out into their nest and fight them on the inside. This is not work for the others. The brunt of it will be borne by us alone.'

There were soft murmurs of assent. The auxiliary forces had performed well throughout the long campaign, offering stalwart support in a hundred massed engagements, but this was different. The tanks would not get into those tunnels, and in such confines regular infantry would struggle. Space Marines had been designed for such work, whether it be in the catacombs of an alien world or inside the tight corridors of a battle cruiser.

'The attack routes are planned, and you will have seen them by now,' the Khan said. 'All gates will be taken simultaneously, all routes inward assaulted together. They will be crushed from the outside in, but be wary – they have not forgotten how to channel that damned roaring, so the Stormseers will be essential. We will be spread thin, and the longer this takes the more men we will lose. I wish to see a swift end to it, so I will lead the attack into the centre. When we decapitate the monster, the body collapses. Hasik, Giyahun – you will come with me and the Legion keshig. Sejanus – I would welcome your presence also.'

Sejanus bowed. 'By your command, lord. I will relish it.'

'They're stirring already,' the Khan said, an anticipatory smile creeping across his predatory features. 'They know it won't be long now, and they're timing their frenzy. We must outmatch them in that. There is a saying on Chogoris – to hunt the beast one becomes the beast. Reflect on that, in the few moments we have remaining.'

Hasik smiled in recognition, and looked at Giyahun. There was an air of impatience kindling now, a desire to see it done.

'I told you to admire them,' the Khan said. 'But not too much. One can admire the thing one kills without being beholden to it. Do this with no spite, and take no pleasure in the killing itself, only the action that delivers it. You are warriors, of a proud and ancient line, and that is the essential matter – we indulge in this violence today because there are other days when we forget it. Thus are we made different from those we come here to end – in time, this will be behind us, and our joy will come from other sources.'

Then his eyes glittered with the old raw enjoyment.

'But not today,' he said, almost conspiratorially. 'On this day, we show them the storm.'

The noise was incredible, off the scale, so violent as to be physically damaging. The hain-ghallh surged so mightily that the earth cracked underfoot, and every crystal shook like a leaf in a gale. The cannons boomed, punching through translucent outcrops and blasting them into spiralling balls of fused slag. The xenos came pushing up out of every hole and crevice, welling like a dark green boil-froth, hurling invective in their guttural battle-tongue before opening up with smoke-filthed hammerguns and gushing flamers.

The legionaries ran straight into it. From every side, from every vantage, they sped headlong into the charge, a carpet of white that crashed against the defences and burrowed deep into them. The onslaught was as vicious as any that had been launched thus far on that world, only greater in scale, for all forces were concentrated now, merged and augmented and combined into a rampaging host of optimal killing power.

Every Legion individual was a tiny army in his own right, capable of laying low entire cities – a mobile tank carcass built up around a living man. The sheer power concentrated in that nexus was formidable, and yet it was multiplied a thousand times by the way in which every one of them fought alongside one another. They knew where their battle-brothers were at all times, warned by both preternatural senses and the ever-changing stream of tactical data that enveloped their helm-augmented visual environments. If an advance looked reckless and haphazard, it was always anything but. A bolt-shell would be launched, and every fighter around it would already be reacting, knowing that its target was now accounted for and reaching for another. A xenos would break from cover, and every fighter would know who would take it down, and how long that would take, and what to do if he failed, and how to react if he succeeded. Individually, a Space Marine could lay low cities. Collectively, they could lay low galaxies.

The two armies smashed together, and the crescendo of ear-cracking noise ramped up further, pocked by alien screams and human bellows, by thin vox-crackles and fulsome throat-roars. Lightning, all of it now warp spun and glimmering, crackled down into the tunnels, catching and racing like wildfire, shriving the hurtling resonance of the xenos roar and winnowing it out.

Hit simultaneously by more than twenty different battlefronts, all perfectly combined and interlocked with support fire, the xenos outer

defences were swept aside and the slipshod gates broken open. Warriors punched through burning arches and into the tunnels beyond, breaking down into shadowy galleries lit only by the fungoid lumps and thick with animal stink.

And there they died. The orks were outmatched in organisation and equipment, but not in numbers and not in raw strength. Fuelled by the ongoing roar-harmonics of the shamans, they hit back at every ingress site and launched counter-attacks of their own. Ironclad lurch-walkers swaggered up from the depths, their rusty claws whirling with fire. Hulking creatures with blood-daubed faces spat out blinding levels of projectiles before throwing themselves into the blood-soaked melee with hooked mauls and energy-wracked cleaver blades.

The tunnels were murderous, tightly wound and locked deep with killing. There was no room in them, no space even to breathe, only a claustrophobic press of crystal edges and dripping fungal growths underlaid with oppressive clamour and stench. The legionaries were driven by steel-edged discipline and the prospect of glory; the xenos by the absolute refusal, drilled deep into every chromosome of their ludicrously resilient bodies, to even contemplate standing down.

So not every battle was won. The greenskins pushed the Legions back in some of the salients, bogged down more, but enough were swept aside in the blitz-paced attacks to form an ingress route, shoving long wounds deeper and deeper into the thickening underground maw. Tactical squads overran intersections and drove on further, backed up by ranged-fire teams. Krak grenades blew barricades apart, and were stormed by warriors wielding thunder hammers and storm shields before others came to consolidate the gains.

In methodology there was little to choose between the two attacking Legions. Both looked like ghosts in that hellish underworld, their armour pale amid the flashing whirl of lumens, both soon streaked with the blood of the enemy. There was no latitude for finesse there, no clear runs for grand charges; there were only the essentials – sword thrust, fist punch, close-range bolter shot – and in that every Space Marine was much the same: as fast and as accurate, as indomitable and as dogged, as any fighters ever created. Even their mingled voices were lost in the echoing thunder, so that Gothic and Cthonian and Khorchin were merged and all that remained distinct was the desperate, elemental struggle for supremacy.

Only one engagement was one-sided – the launch of the primary spearhead formation, headed by the Khan and his keshig. Qin Xa fought at his primarch's side, a living tempest in ivory and gold, his habitual reserve swept away by the sheer volume of killing he unleashed. Hasik and Giyahun were scarce less brutal, leading their own chosen retinues and flinging disruptor-crowned blades around with abandon. Sejanus of the Luna Wolves, also in full Terminator armour, headed up his own knot of grizzled veterans, fighting in a more orthodox fashion but with no reduction in deadliness. Three hundred warriors in all made up that spearhead, by far the smallest of the tactical units launched into the xenos hive, but by a distance the most lethal and the fastest moving. Driven onward by the unmatchable example of the primarch, they tore their way deeper, tearing a path towards the deepest core.

The Khan himself was unstoppable. The psychic roar that had proved so destructive during the long campaign had no purchase on him. All who fought alongside him seemed immune to its soul-deadening effects, sharing in a corona of psychic protection as he slew and slew and slew. In his presence, every legionary was enhanced, lifted to an even more rarefied level of precision. Only before him did the orks display anything close to hesitancy – their bellows died out, their blows fell awry, their tenacity seemed to melt. As the Khan's great curved blade rose and fell, shrouded now in thick layers of xenos blood, the spearhead delved ever deeper, hurtling towards the kernel of that dark and alien city.

The perfect warrior, his sons called him. That prideful moniker seemed almost modest then, set against the magnificence of the Khan's art, yet there was nothing arrogant in it, nothing reflective, just an unconscious and instinctive brilliance with the blade, an exuberance that lit up the narrow paths and banished the foetid shadows, an exactitude that carried both terror and awe in its glittering wake. When they saw this mood upon him, the White Scars believed the Khan had no equal in any army of any race of any time. His sons were hardly impartial, of course, and there were many such claims made about many other warriors. That did not mean, as Hasik was fond of observing when the matter came up, that they were entirely wrong.

They finally broke into the huge chamber at the base of the entire complex. The earth shook with heat around them, and the walls themselves glowed a sullen red. Magma plumes jetted from the unquiet surface of a

wide lake of fire, splashing against stalactites of crystal that jutted from the high chamber roof.

Only one path spanned that inferno – a long spur of reflective rock, ten metres wide and a hundred long, thrown out across the churn below like some incongruous processional. The spur was both smooth and wide, rising gradually along its length towards a final gate – the portal into the innermost chamber of the entire subterranean complex.

The orks had gathered before the gate in huge numbers, knowing that this was their last stand. They clustered before heavy piers of rock, each one decorated with crude effigies of their strange gods, their warriors' hides almost black against the dance of flame. These were the largest of their kind, held back for the greatest of the great fights, and they lumbered heavily out to war now, screaming with almost inchoate belligerence.

And it was there, halfway across that causeway, that the advance was halted for the first time. The huge xenos monsters crashed in among the Terminators, and a matched slaughter began in earnest. A maelstrom of bullets and energy weapons scythed out from positions below the gate's vast sagging lintel, spraying death into the popping magma below. White Scars and Luna Wolves elites strove with oncoming waves of xenos, drawing deep on near-limitless reserves of strength, but still the assault faltered. The Khan himself engaged a hulking leviathan clad in power armour, and the two of them wrestled together at the apex of the spur's arch, two titans of combat raging amid the leaping flames.

For a critical moment, the position teetered. The vanguard force had pushed on far ahead of all other elements in its audacious bid to sever the beast's head and bring a swift end to the engagement. The entire Bloodmaw above them was still gripped with a rictus of combat on every level, but most of those battles were still a long way off. The orks sensed this, and every one of the gate guards surged out to slam heavily into the outnumbered throng. The multiplied impact of those hits was horrific, and one of Giyahun's own Terminator guards, weighing many tonnes, was thrown bodily from the causeway and sent plummeting into the magma below.

Giyahun slew the originator of that stroke, slicing the creature in two with a savage slash of his glaive. As he did so, something even greater stirred under the occlusion of the gate itself – something huge and sluggish, bleeding with xenos malice, its hide crackling with greenish energies, its

limbs barred with overlapping plates of iron so thick that a man would have been crushed to bear just one of them.

‘Chogoris!’ Giyahun cried, spinning out of contact with the next greenskin, swerving around the next and vaulting past three more.

Spurred by that example, others pushed forwards. Qin Xa was as deadly as ever, eviscerating each opponent with his crackling blades even as he turned to face the next. Hasik and Sejanus fought on side by side, screening one another as they hacked and maimed. The Khan dispatched the monster before him with a blistering flurry of speed-blurred strokes, kicking the corpse out into the magma lake.

By then Giyahun had reached the gate. He killed twice more before turning to the hulking creature emerging from the gloom. He got two strikes in – jabs with his glaive that seared flesh and provoked a roar that made the entire chamber shake to its foundations. Even over that booming bellow, the warrior’s laugh could be heard – savage, unfettered, capricious.

Then the fist swung out – a vast alien slab, a curl of green-black flesh as hard as beaten adamantium. It caught Giyahun at the neck, a jackhammer blow that drove him to his knees.

‘Ukhrakh!’ shouted the Khan, too far away, alarmed for the first time.

Withdraw, the Khorchin signified – a principle of warfare on the plains as old as time, but here just a command, shouted in sudden desperation.

Giyahun reeled, with no intention of obeying. His break from formation had galvanised the attack, and he whirled his glaive around to plunge it into the behemoth’s armour-clad neck. The stave flashed around, perfectly aimed, but the creature was faster than it looked. It struck out again, biting into the warrior’s helm and smashing through ceramite, tearing up muscle and breaking bone.

Giyahun’s feet flew from the earth, his heavy body propelled, breaking apart, over the seething lake of fire. The Khan reached out, impossibly distant, as if he could reel him in by force of will alone.

When Giyahun hit the magma, his hunched power pack exploded, igniting a bubble of thundering flame. For a moment the entire chamber seemed to shudder. The White Scars halted, sudden disbelief staying their hands. Even the orks sensed something, and their headlong charge missed a beat. The Khan himself broke from combat and stared into the waves of breaking fire, his cloak snapping against the gale of force unleashed. What

remained of Giyahun’s body was consumed in that hurricane, burned away, rendered down to atoms.

Then the primarch looked up, and despite the racing furnace around them, a chill descended over every soul. He uttered two words only, his voice suddenly as spare and bleak as the void.

‘Pull away.’

His sons complied instantly. Even Sejanus and the Luna Wolves, warriors from a Legion that gave no quarter to any foe, withdrew.

The Khan advanced then, alone now, his demeanour changed from flamboyance to a night-sere menace. He swung his sword about him languidly, loosening up, cutting the air into whispers, and the orks themselves hung back, bellows snuffed out, bravado shaken into wariness.

Then he started to kill. He broke into a run, first heavily, measuring his strokes, then accelerating, faster and harder, until he had moved into that state the Chogorian sages called *alakh geh*, where the thought alone could kill, where the distance between intention and action was made nothing, and where vengeance became a living thing with both extension and immanence. Under a gathering shroud of elemental vendetta, he killed them all. If he had slain freely before, now the carnage was so complete that it scraped the boundaries of both the divine and the diabolic. Even the war-hardened Legiones Astartes, used to witnessing prodigal exercises of violence, were silenced by it.

The xenos never laid a claw on him. The Khan moved now, not with joy, but with dreadful perfection. They faced up to him, and they were swept away. They tried to parry, and he cut them down. They tried to combine, and they were ripped into whimpering slivers. He danced through their numbers and built a corridor of blood around himself, slaying like some spectre of the endless dark, silent as a grave-mark, chill like the night gale of the Ulaav.

One of the Luna Wolves, inspired by that vision, tried to join him then, to add his blade to his, and it took Qin Xa to hold him back.

‘No, brother,’ the keshig-master warned, quietly. ‘Only observe.’

But by then, the Khan himself was almost invisible, hidden behind a curtain of severed flesh and thrown blood, a primordial force burning through the xenos ranks, inviolable and darkly magnificent. For the first time in that entire campaign, the greenskins tried to run, to scramble away from the hungering devil that raced to devour them, but there was no space

left, no time left, no hope left. Most were caught as they turned, their backs carved open and their necks broken. The few that managed to get back to the gate cowered under the shadow of that greater monster, the swollen master of their brood-lair, who retreated beyond the portal in a shuffling, shaking display of abject submission.

The Khan passed under the gate's edge. None of his army followed him in. They held vigil on the spur instead, watching the gaping entrance, holding to their last order against every instinct. All that emerged from the far side of the gate now were alien screams, one after the other, overlapped and smothering, a chorus of terror and panic that went on and on and on and never relented.

Not one of the xenos escaped back to the spur. Seconds of that carnage passed, then minutes, and the screaming just got worse. The magma fires, as if in sympathy to the apocalyptic toll of life-ending, slapped and blazed against the outer walls of the last chamber, grasping futilely at the horror unfolding within and powerless to stop it. After a while, it became impossible to listen to.

Eventually, though, even the screams echoed out.

Qin Xa, alone, slowly approached the gate, his boots crunching over the corpse road. As he drew close, the Khan re-emerged.

The primarch's armour was red now, a thick layer that dripped from every ridge and plate edge. His cloak was torn into shreds, and his blade was a coursing rivulet of xenos blood. He walked tall still, but the fluency was gone now, burned away into numbness.

For a moment, they looked at one another, master and lieutenant, both their faces hidden by dragon helms. The heat-shaken air burned around them.

The Khan reached up to his gorget and removed his helm. The visage that emerged was hollow-cheeked now, though still burning with the dregs of that unholy cocktail of grief, shock and rage. His eyes glimmered darkly, as if the flicker of some malign potency still lingered, clutching to life even as the reason for its existence slithered away.

And that, too, was how we made you.

'Ended?' asked Qin Xa softly. 'All of them?'

The darkness passed. The Khan, moving shakily, locked his helm to his armour. Blood sluiced from him still. He was as red now as the Angel Sanguinius had been, though not as beautiful.

He nodded, sheathing his blade.
‘We’re finished here,’ he said.

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THIRTEEN

It took many hours for the last reaches of that place to be purged. Warriors of both Legions still fought and killed and died before the xenos resistance was crushed entirely, and even then, just as at every battlefield on which the hain were present, it would take many days of repeated burn operations to be sure that they would not come back.

After the battle was over, long into the deep of Gar-Ban-Gar's night, it would usually have been the time for celebration. Pyres would have been lit, not just for the disposal of xenos corpses, but for remembrance and relief. Another world had passed into the dominion of mankind, and that moment was always marked by fires.

For much of the Imperial force, that is indeed what happened. The Luna Wolves cried out against the stars, vocalising gang chants drawn from the earliest days on hard-edged Cthonia. They reached out to their brothers from Chogoris, as wild in aspect if not in manners, and they laughed together, wiping the soot from their gauntlets and ripping the teeth from the skulls of the xenos for trophies. A kind of febrile relief shuddered through the ranks, given licence to discharge by the captains, who knew that after so many long months of unremitting sacrifice what remained of their human emotion had to be given some kind of expression.

With the bulk of the murdering done, the Auxilia moved in. Columns of clean-up troops filed down into the tunnels, most wearing contagion suits and carrying rad-guns. Heavy lifters churned their way from orbit, each one stuffed with Imperial officials and scrutinisers and xenobiologists and terraformers and masters of the Lex Obsequio. Soon that river would become a flood, and the staff of the Administratum would outnumber those of the Legions themselves. Of the original combatants, only the Apothecaries remained on the battle sites, doing what they always did after the conflict was over. The Luna Wolves Apothecaries went methodically

about their business, free of sentiment, tearing progenoid glands free from flesh. Their White Scars' *emchi* counterparts were slower, whispering words of soul-passage for the fallen, not moving on until the proper rites were complete.

It would have been usual for the primarch to join the celebrations. On Chogoris, the Khan had always presided over revels once the cities had fallen, feasting on the rich bounty before ensuring his fighters shared in it. On other worlds, he had done the same, preserving the ways of the Palatine War into the cold avenues of the stars.

Not this time. The Khan sent Hasik to watch over the Legion lest their hot blood boil over into something uncontrollable, then left the battlefield, taking none with him but Qin Xa. Together the two of them climbed back up through the echoing and blood-damp hive, out into the cooling air and away north, leaving the frenzy behind them. As they went, the flames crackled higher, making the dusk air glow.

After a while, they passed beyond the watch patrols and the overflights and, for a few moments at least, were something like alone. The Khan turned back to face the way they had come and looked over the site of destruction. The Bloodmaw smouldered away in the darkness, a sinkhole of ruin. For a long time, he said nothing.

'It was weakness,' he said, at last.

'No one says it,' Qin Xa replied, calm as ever.

'I have lost warriors before.'

'He was with us at the start.'

'It had to happen, sooner or later.'

'Did it?'

'Nothing is eternal.'

'Some things are. A good blade. The wind on skin. An oath.'

The Khan let slip a crooked smile. 'Just what would make you angry, then, Xa?' he asked.

'If you became, in some way, like other men,' the master of the keshig said. 'If you had seen him die and not done what you did. If you had let one of them, just one, live. Then, Khagan, I would have been angry.'

The primarch pondered that. He reached up to his straggling hair to push it back from his scarred face and traced a fresh line of blood across his skin.

'I will have to get used to it,' he said.

'I do not think you ever will.'

Then there were footfalls coming up the slope – the soft grind of Cataphractii Terminator battleplate. Pairs of glowing lenses emerged from the gloom. Most halted, holding back twenty paces distant, but their master, Sejanus, approached the primarch.

The captain bowed. He was helmless, and his eyes were steely in the low light.

‘You look so much like my brother,’ the Khan murmured.

‘I wished to give honour to your dead, lord,’ Sejanus said. ‘But if you desire to be alone–’

‘It is appreciated.’

Sejanus looked a little discomforted then. ‘I have had word from Horus Lupercal. I thought you would wish to know as soon as possible.’

The Khan glanced briefly at Qin Xa. ‘We were due to meet, after this,’ he said. ‘Combine our forces before the assault on the core.’

‘He has already begun. The opportunity to strike came, and he felt compelled to take it.’

The Khan looked at him for a long time. ‘I had no inkling of this.’

‘I was told to assure you that no disrespect is implied. The chance came, and could not be passed up. Once his current target is destroyed, he invites you to join him on the *Vengeful Spirit*, where he can explain further.’

The Khan smiled to himself. ‘He… *invites* me.’

‘That is the form of words we have, lord.’

‘He does not order?’

Sejanus looked shocked. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No, that could not be–’

‘Peace. I jest. I barely take orders from my Father, let alone anyone else. But, tell me, captain – this change has come from nowhere.’

At that, there was another sign of uneasiness. ‘I understand that. I am not privy to all aspects of this decision. I asked for further clarification, but was told that the order stands.’

The Khan nodded slowly. ‘Your Librarians,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘What is their status?’

‘They have been withdrawn.’

‘With no explanation.’

‘Not one that I have been told.’

‘Operational reasons, no doubt.’

‘I expect so, lord.’

The Khan smiled dryly. ‘But you will remain here, I trust, until all is concluded.’

Sejanus bowed. ‘It will be an honour, lord.’ He hesitated, as if unsure how much more to say. ‘My master – and I, for that matter – have nothing but praise for what our Legions have accomplished together. He wished me to make plain, and I am happy to do so, that it is not mere proximity that made this alliance suitable for the Imperial purpose. He believes we worked well together.’

The Khan inclined his head a fraction in acknowledgement. ‘You have a diplomat’s tongue, Sejanus. When you next converse with your master, tell him that I regret we were not able to join forces as arranged. Tell him that I remain keen to speak with him whenever he is able. Tell him that I wish for no misunderstandings between us. The time and the place can be of his choosing.’

Sejanus bowed.

‘Impress that on him, if you will,’ the Khan said. ‘When he calls, I will answer.’

Hasik watched the fires, listened to the cries of released aggression and relief, felt the warm slick of halaak slide down his throat. He had released his keshig to join the others, and could just about detect Goghal singing somewhere, trying to teach the Cthonians old Talskar chants.

He had no appetite for it.

Warriors had always died in combat, both before and after ascension, but Giyahun had always seemed invincible. Hasik drank more, knowing that virtually no amount of alcohol could truly dull his senses as it had once done, but the rehearsal of the old habit was easy to slip back into. The Space Marines had mortal elements left in them despite all that had been done to their bodies, fragments of a human past that lingered somewhere in that skein of vat-grown organs and bioengineered tangles.

A figure stumbled out from the flickering darkness towards him, and it took Hasik a moment to recognise the outline of Borghal. The Stormseer looked just as exhausted as he had done after the fight for the Saddleback.

‘Noyan-khan,’ Borghal saluted, placing his hand out to lean against the cooling chassis of a Rhino transport.

‘You killed more shamans, I hope,’ said Hasik.

‘Very many. I understand a lesson now. Strange, how it took so long.’

Hasik looked at him a little sourly. ‘If the Cthonians used what they had, we’d have finished this quicker.’

‘I wished to find their Librarian, but no one can tell me where he is. He might listen, now.’

‘He’d be a fool not to. But then the galaxy has many fools in it, most of them on Terra.’

Borghal hesitated. ‘Are you all right, noyan-khan?’

Hasik took another long swig. ‘Get some rest, zadyin arga. It won’t stop here. Come the dawn, we’ll be doing this all over again.’

Borghal looked at him for a moment longer, but then nodded. He was at the end of his strength. He bowed weakly, then stumbled off again, seeking somewhere to slump.

Hasik didn’t watch him go. More groups of warriors limped past, some of them carrying deep wounds, the kind that would have killed a regular human but merely made these warriors wince and adjust their stance until it healed. Most were White Scars, who all bowed, and the rest were Luna Wolves, who didn’t.

Except one. Rheor seemed to have been looking for him. He had fared better than many of the others, and his armour looked almost intact.

‘You’re a hard man to find, khan,’ Rheor said, his heavy face splitting in an awkward attempt at a smile.

Hasik grunted. ‘Not that hard, clearly,’ he said.

Rheor looked around them, at the throngs of bodies moving in the dark. The scene was primal, with the firelight and the smell of blood and the rehearsal of old war cries.

‘You wish to complain about our witches,’ Hasik said. ‘To tell me that I should have consulted you first.’

‘No. Not that.’ Rheor looked back at him. ‘I’m not a proud man, khan. I can see when a tactic works. We were a good combination, I think.’

Hasik drank again. That was hard to deny.

‘We’re alike,’ Rheor went on. ‘Our two Legions. We’re hive scum, you’re barbarians. They’ll let us build their empire for them, but we won’t be suffered to live in it.’

It was the first time the Luna Wolves captain had spoken thus. Before, he had been taciturn to the point of inscrutability.

‘So then, we have a custom,’ Rheor said haltingly. ‘Something we took from Cthonia, though it changed once we’d seen other worlds. After battle,

we meet. We form bonds. They can be a source of strength.’

Hasik looked at him uncertainly. ‘A Legion order?’

‘Not so much. An informal arrangement.’

For the first time, Hasik noticed that there were others standing in the shadows, further back, as if waiting for Rheor. They were all XVI Legion, though seemingly from many different squads.

‘I’d like to show you, if you were willing,’ Rheor said. ‘We can learn from what you did. No doubt you can learn from us too.’

‘What is that you have there? Some kind of coin?’

‘I can explain. Come, if you wish to. Stay, if you prefer. But the offer’s there.’

Hasik hesitated. Solitude had been his intention, to wallow a little in indulgent grief, knowing that it couldn’t last long, knowing he’d be called back to the Khan’s side soon.

He had been elevated a long way. Old ties of kinship and clan were gone, or stretched so far they had become almost meaningless. He was the master of the Horde of the Earth now, a commander of thousands of the finest troops ever created, a conqueror of worlds and a scourge of empires.

And yet, somewhere buried a long way down, that old human past would never quite be extinguished, nagging at him like an old and half-remembered dream. Brotherhood was still required.

He looked up at Rheor. The Luna Wolves captain beckoned for him to follow.

‘You’d be welcome, brother,’ he said.

Something in the gesture suddenly appealed.

‘For a moment, maybe,’ Hasik replied, making ready to go with him. ‘Where’s the harm?’

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FOURTEEN

The air, the rock, the long-dried seas – all were red, terracotta banded by vermillion and orange, vivid under a haze-shrouded crimson sun. The deserts yawned off to all horizons, studded with mesas and gouged with canyons. It was hot, a desiccating heat that pulled every last speck of moisture from the cracked earth and swallowed it up into the hungry wind. Traces of a war before time lingered in every shadow; the faint whisper of ancient rads still lived in the poisoned soils.

The skimmer shot across the surface of Baal, hugging the ground and casting a deep black shadow on the red sands. It was a IX Legion craft, polished to a high sheen and glinting in the ambient light. Its thruster housings were chased in dark gold, as were its long flanks. It had slender lines, as proportionate as everything constructed by the Blood Angels artificers, though also as heavily armed. Twin bolter snubs poked out from under the sweep of adamantium blast shielding, illustrating aptly that culture's tension between extreme violence and wildly creative energy.

Azkaellon watched the familiar landscape shoot by. Like all his Legion, he had a mixture of devotion and hatred for the world that had shaped him. Its punishing environment was the crucible that had made him what he was, turning him slowly from a baseline human into a son of Sanguinius. He would have died a hundred times over to defend it, and when away from it all he dreamed of was its emptiness, its raw beauty, its lurid colouration.

But it had never been an easy place to live in. Baal was not a nurturing home world, only a proving ground, an anvil, a test of the strong.

He turned from the viewport to look at the only other occupant of the generous crewbay. The primarch of the V Legion, sat in a burnished throne, was staring out at the same vistas. In the distance, the striated cliffs of the Moraglio massif piled up against a dull red sky, cracked and worn by millennia of rad-laced storms. Otherwise all was spare as iron, blasted and

driven down to the most basic of elements. Nothing much could live out here save rustdrakes and fangworms, scuttling out at night to hunt by the eerie light of the twin moons.

‘Not quite as welcoming as your home world, lord,’ Azkaellon said.

The Khan said nothing for a while. He carried on scrutinising the landscape as it raced past. Ahead of them, the ground was rising steadily, thrusting up into broken-edged hexagonal plates. ‘But I understand it now,’ he replied, at length.

‘Understand what, lord?’

‘Where the fury comes from.’ The Khan turned to look at Azkaellon. ‘This is a fine world. This is a world for the raising of fighters.’

Azkaellon bowed. ‘Few off-worlders recognise it.’

‘Terrans, you mean.’

‘You say that with a certain antipathy.’

‘I am a Terran, Blood Angel, as is your master.’

Azkaellon laughed. ‘Of a kind,’ he said.

The landscape continued to rise, a gathering mass of piled cliffs, each one marked by the thin trails of cut-stone stairways. Chasms sliced through the rock, the channels of long burned-out rivers. The flyer skimmed across them, and leathery avians could be seen far below, flapping across the voids in lazy arrowheads.

At some stage, the natural stone gave way to artificial walls. The precise point of transition was hard to pinpoint – one moment, they were looking at the rust-coloured flanks of the desert highlands; the next, their flyer was passing not ridges but ramparts, not dry riverbeds but highways. The great warhold of the Blood Angels rose up from the earth of its world in organic majesty, morphing slowly into a spiralling collection of domes, towers and colonnades. Gold plating glinted under the red skies, barred with decorative friezes of ebony and chalcedony, and underpinned with geometric stonework hewn from Baal’s inimitable terracotta heart.

The flyer swept round in a long arc, giving a clear view of the fortress’ interior – its wide terrazzo courtyards, high basilicas and ceremonial cloisters, as well as the solid defence towers and multiple landing pads. Rows of gunships were visible from the open doors of mighty hangars, suspended from deployment cages. Legion aspirants could be made out down below, being schooled in formal bladework on fenced training grounds.

Then the flyer was swallowed up by the lumen-studded innards of an intake portal, and its speed finally began to ebb. It glided to a halt, touching down on a series of impeccably crafted flex-struts.

Azkaellon gestured to the opening doors. ‘If you will, lord,’ he invited.

The Khan rose and made his way to the extending embarkation ramp. As he emerged into an enormous reception hall, he tasted hot, dusty air. Basalt columns ran down the length of the echoing space, interspersed with graven images of gold-masked warriors. The place smelled faintly sweet, and a low hum of atmospheric processors murmured away on the edge of hearing.

Waiting for him was an honour guard of twenty-four Blood Angels retainers, plus a single figure in bone-white carrying a skull-topped staff.

‘Welcome to Baal, lord,’ Yesugei said, bowing. ‘It has been a long time.’

The V Legion delegation was small: Yesugei himself, four warriors of the ordu, a menial staff of thirty, some servitors and the crew of the starship *Naman*. The Blood Angels had housed them in a tower complex in the northeast corner of the enormous fortress. As was the way of their hosts, the guests had been treated extravagantly well, given access to every facility and offered repeat bouts of martial contest. If the IX Legion had a flaw, Yesugei had decided, it was this unwearying enthusiasm for testing themselves in close combat. The four legionaries in his delegation had initially taken up the challenge readily enough, but after a while the repeated gladiatorial bouts lost their appeal.

‘I do not know why they insist on it,’ he told the Khan, once they were alone in the Stormseer’s allotted chamber. ‘They cannot be compensating – they are ferocious.’

The Khan wandered over to a glass-topped table stacked with decanters. He lifted one to the red light and swilled what looked like wine. Then he looked around at the rococo decoration, the stone-carved walls, the ubiquitous images of smooth-faced, youthful warriors.

‘They’re restless,’ he said. ‘Getting ready for something.’ The Khan reached for a goblet and poured himself a drink. He sipped it, raised an eyebrow, then poured a larger one. ‘What, though? I don’t think they know themselves.’

‘And he’s gifted,’ Yesugei said. ‘Your brother.’

‘Of course he is.’

‘His soul is scattered through time, and he half perceives it. Forget the wings – that is why he supports this.’

‘I don’t envy him. Better to face the future without shades and phantasms whispering at you.’ He reached for another decanter and tried another glass. Everything tasted of burned sucrose. ‘Do you have a counterpart?’

‘They are political creatures here – their first captain, Raldoron, spoke to me often. Librarians, too – the one I spoke to on the *Red Tear*, Kano, has been present for some weeks. They are cultured but impulsive. They see us as a curiosity, I think. In truth, they are burning to know what the Thousand Sons will say, but I tell them nothing, for I know nothing.’

‘A happy state of affairs. And are *they* here yet?’

‘They have not sent a delegation. Only the primarch.’

The Khan laughed. ‘Really? Gods, he has his reputation for arrogance, but still.’ He strolled over to the long windows. Baal’s skies were fading to a deep crimson. It was still hot, but soon the desert climate would plunge into freezing. Like its sons, Baal was an all-or-nothing proposition. ‘So, tell me what you’ve learned.’

Yesugei sighed. ‘It will not be easy. Your Father gave you talents, but He also gave you egos. Sanguinius is uncertain. His future-sense makes him stay his hand, and I believe he fears the potential as much as he understands it. Magnus, on the other hand…’ He let slip a wry smile. ‘Magnus will either save this or damn it all. He sees no reason for restraint. I have not been given an audience with him, but I sensed his arrival. I could sense it even before his ships broke the veil.’ He shook his head. ‘So *powerful*. Truly, only once before did I encounter the like, and that was on Terra.’

The Khan took that in. ‘So what are our chances?’ he asked. ‘Optimistic?’

Yesugei grinned. ‘As I have always been.’

‘Then this was no wasted journey.’

Yesugei nodded. ‘As long as you’re sure.’

‘Sure. *Sure*. How can one be sure about any of this?’ The Khan drained the last of the wine, and placed the goblet back on the table. ‘What choice did we have? We could not stay in the shadows, letting others make the running forever. As it is, we’ve still no doubt been too cautious.’

‘For good reason. If they seek to use this–’

‘If they seek to use any of it,’ the Khan said darkly, ‘we will end it now. I will be the pawn in no player’s game. Either they take us for what we are, or they can have their empire and we’ll outrun them all.’

Yesugei never looked away. ‘And is there galaxy enough for that, Khagan?’

‘We’re fast enough.’ The Khan smiled. ‘We’ll always have the space we need.’

The conclave table was circular, three metres in diameter, carved from a single piece of Baalite black granite, faintly reflective and speckled with phaneritic points. A flame danced over its centre, the size of a human fist, suspended a few inches above the stone. That was the chamber’s only artificial light; the rest came from narrow windows cut into terracotta sandstone, each of which threw a bar of warm red across the flagged floor.

The room was high up, thrust into the red planet’s thin air near the summit of the fortress. The pale curve of the second moon could be perceived from one of the slit windows, translucent like a lens, gazing down serenely on the world it had long ago helped to destroy.

Three souls sat at the table – the Angel, the Crimson King and the Warhawk. All primarchs were creatures of magnificence, blessed with greater stature than any unaltered human, but this trio shared a certain symmetry of splendour. Each one was tall, clad in gold and ceramite finery. It was said by some that the power of the primarchs had always been combinatory, such that when gathered together their respective talents merged into something greater than the constituent parts. This had always been a dangerous idea, and one publicly rebuked by others with greater knowledge of the genesis of the project, but it never quite went away, and in that place, just then, it was hard not to imagine the auras of the three primarchs mingling, merging in the half-crimson glow of a Baalite noon, solidifying into something new, stronger and stranger.

All primarchs were also creatures of the warp. Whether by original design or by the taint of their scattering, all of them had the aether running through their veins like a lesser mortal had only blood. Some wore that heritage openly, some kept it hidden, others suppressed it through aversion to what they were, or had been made into, or feared they would become.

Magnus the Red was the most egregious example of the first inclination. Even the ungifted sensed the power beating solidly at his heart. Those with any sensitivity at all to the other side of the veil saw more closely to the truth – he was an inferno boiling away, barely contained within boundaries of flesh and sinew. When he moved, even the most modest of gestures, it was as if multiple shadows both preceded and followed, blurring across the

networks of space-time. The most acute of all knew that his true form was almost certainly a mystery to all but himself and perhaps the Father who had created him, and that the projection was, for all its incomparable art, just that.

At a certain level, though, he was merely a ruddy giant with a vivid mane, a single eye and a ready and generous smile. His voice was pulled up out of his great galleon hull of a chest, superficially avuncular and with an almost childlike enthusiasm for esoteric language-forms. They said he spoke a hundred languages himself, some long dead, some not yet even codified by its natural speakers. They said he spoke xenos tongues too, and that he had conversed at length with the scholar-seers of the eldar.

They said so much about Magnus. No one, perhaps not even him, really knew how much of it was true.

‘You worry too much,’ he said.

The Khan shot him an amused glance. ‘So you keep saying.’

‘Because it is the truth. You hobble yourselves, not as greatly as our deluded brothers from Barbarus and Olympia, but you are hobbled all the same.’

The Angel looked up from contemplation. ‘Who will fight alongside you, then, Magnus?’ he asked.

The Crimson King laughed. ‘So you’ve heard of that.’

‘And I,’ said the Khan. ‘The Luna Wolves won’t do it anymore.’

‘They said that to you?’

‘More than once.’

Magnus sighed. ‘There are rumours about all of us. They say your people venerate the severed heads of your enemies. They say Baalites drink the blood of the fallen. Does it really matter, what they say?’

‘So much like our Father,’ smiled Sanguinius, shaking his head a little. ‘You talk, but don’t listen. No wonder He favours you.’

Magnus laughed. ‘Come, now. I was told this would be a conference for the betterment of all, not a trial for the Thousand Sons. All I’ve heard thus far is warnings, and I can get those from plenty of mouths.’

‘The mind-weapons must be preserved,’ said the Khan, patiently, setting out the case again, ‘but they have a blade on both edges. The Wolf King isn’t a fool – he knows this just like we do.’

‘Because you both come from witch-haunted devil-worlds,’ Magnus said. ‘The doctrine of Unity is anathema to you, because you see the future and

you fear it. All this talk of purity and isolation – it can't be sustained. Technology will come to Chogoris sooner or later, and you'll have to put your folk tales away then.'

'Why must you denigrate them?' the Khan sighed, looking at him wearily.

'Because they're nonsense, brother. Gods and demons and sprites and witches – you should listen to yourselves.' Magnus pushed back from the table, spreading his great arms along its curved edge. 'We call it the Ocean. It is a product of galactic harmonics, something to be explored. Some of its manifestations seem to be of a sentient kind, at least in outline, but that is not how things *are*. That is the way our minds make it appear – what they conjure to help us understand it. We must do our best to make sense of the vortices, and so what do we cling to? The old figures and archetypes, the ones we used when we were scrabbling around in the dirt of Uruk. Come, tell me brother, do you truly believe in these goblins of the warp?'

The Khan regarded him steadily. 'Yaksha,' he said. 'Yes, they are real.'

Even the Angel looked sceptical then. 'As in, truly real, or as metaphor?'

'Does it matter?' the Khan asked. He raised his hand to the light. 'What is this thing here? A gauntlet? A swirl of atoms? A mathematical description? It kills just as well, whatever the provenance.'

Magnus laughed again. He did so often, and it was unfeigned mirth when it came. 'But some explanations are better than others,' he said. 'That's the point.'

The Angel placed his hands together, and his wings rustled softly. 'These discussions will not sway the Lord Russ, who, so far as I know, is not given to discussion of the finer points of philosophy. Our purpose here must be simpler – to retain what we have, and keep the zealots quiet.'

'I'm not worried about Russ,' said Magnus.

'You ought to be,' said the Angel.

'Rules,' said the Khan quietly.

The other two looked at him.

'Laws,' the Khan said, looking up at them. 'Believe me, I'm no lover of them, but we require a statute of limitation. Something to keep things within bounds.' He took a deep breath, as if staving off an unpalatable task. 'We fought the greenskin xenos and their power was immense. What was their weakness? They could not keep it under control. We used that against them, and it accelerated the victory. Our doctrine has ever been this – we set

bounds on what we aspire to. We draw on the nether plane, but we do not set up a house within it. We take the tools we can use, but we do not enquire of those that are forbidden.'

There was a short silence as the two others absorbed that. Sanguinius spoke first.

'But where, then, does the line fall?' he asked.

'Exactly,' said Magnus. 'I will not make Chogorian myths the guide here.' He shook his head. 'This is against the spirit of the age. We cowered behind legends during the Age of Strife, and it took our Father to restore some spine to the species. We are exploring the physical galaxy, and so must also explore the psychic one.'

'Then the Librarius will remain the same,' said the Khan.

'As it always has been. The Librarius houses our scholars, our keepers of knowledge. We are not just warriors, brother – we are the guardians of the species.'

'And who will guard them from us, if we do not do it ourselves?' said the Khan.

'We need to at least speak of laws, that much is clear,' said Sanguinius, turning back to Magnus. 'The turn is coming – you know it, we know it. We have supporters, but our enemies are more powerful. He will have to rule, sooner or later.'

'A reformed Librarius could be taken to Malcador,' said the Khan. 'We could present it to him, now, before the test comes. He knows the power of mind-weapons, but it is for us to show him that we can control them. If we do not, others will whisper to him the alternatives.'

'Draw them up, then,' said Magnus. He grinned, then seemed to shrug. 'Compile some lists of places-we-dare-not-go and things-we-dare-not-touch, and I'll take a look. I'll see what my wicked cabals make of them too.'

'This is not a jest,' said Sanguinius.

'Is it not? I find it amusing.' Magnus stretched his fingers out, running them across the black granite as if he would squeeze it into splinters. 'I was told that we had been bled of fear. I was told we had been elevated to a greater state, and that the stars held no terrors for us any longer. It disappoints me to see that this is not so.' He shook his head again, and the fronds of his mane shuffled. 'What can we tell Malcador that he does not already know? You call them mind-weapons. He will have his own name

for them, culled from aeons of research. He will know how they work, and why they were given to us, and what their destiny is. How could he not? He was there when we were made!' He laughed again. 'I wish that all the Legions had them. I wish that all our brothers celebrated them. I wish that everything were permitted that does not cause harm.'

Sanguinius snorted. 'You know they cause harm.'

'More than a bolter? More than a battleship?'

'Far more,' said the Khan darkly. 'If unguarded.'

The two of them held one another's gaze for a few moments. Slowly, Magnus lost his smile. For an instant, it seemed as if he were reading something in the Khan's expression that went beyond the visual.

In the end, though, Magnus shrugged it off with another broad smile.

'So what of Horus?' he asked. 'Your personal project? He would be a powerful addition to the cause.'

The Khan shook his head. 'I know not. Not yet. For a moment, I thought we had an understanding – that we had showed him what could be done – but then he pulled away. Nothing ruled out, nothing committed to.'

'He plays the long game,' said Magnus.

'To what end?' asked the Khan.

The Angel said nothing, and an awkward silence fell.

Eventually, Magnus relented.

'You tell me I do not listen,' he said wearily. 'Maybe so. We were all made proud, so the crime is hardly limited to me.' He curled his fingers back into fists. 'But on this occasion, I will. See, even I can learn flexibility. I will study what you produce, and I will think on it. You have my word. Then we will meet again, and see what can be done. Perhaps there will be some way, perhaps not. It is good, I suppose, to even mention these matters without being accused of being some kind of moral deviant.'

The Khan looked sceptical, studying Magnus for a long time, probing for some subterfuge or dissemblance. 'Keep it secret,' he said at last. 'Just the three of us. The fraternity of primarchs is quarrelsome enough.'

'Yes, and all fuelled by secrecy,' Magnus said. 'Very well, though. Secret, for now.'

'We present it only when complete,' the Khan reiterated.

Magnus looked at him shrewdly. 'You do not get on with our Father, do you, Jaghatai? This much is known about you, even when so much else is not. You think He's too close and driven by plans He does not divulge. And

yet, here you are, keeping this secret until all is accomplished, lest any misunderstandings or miscommunications jeopardise its success. You wish to remain close now yourself, to keep things under wraps, to manage us like children until the success of this vision can be assured. Perhaps you two are not so dissimilar. Or perhaps you understand the nature of politics better than you pretend.'

'I never pretend,' said the Khan.

'All of us do.'

'Believe that if you wish.'

The Angel held up a hand. 'Peace,' he said. 'We came here as allies, we should leave as allies. If we cannot overcome our differences here, they will be rejoicing on Barbarus within the year, so this is the task before us – find a vision. If we do not do it, no one else will.'

Magnus switched his amused gaze to the Angel. 'So statesmanlike,' he murmured. 'But you're right, of course.' He leaned forwards, extending his open hands across the tabletop, one for each brother. 'We swear it here, then, on this day – the safeguarding of the Librarius, under our watch, for an eternity of service. Do not take my levity to heart – I wish this to succeed. I understand the dangers, and I understand the need.'

Sanguinius took his brother's hand, and the jewelled gauntlets locked tight. 'Said well.' The Angel extended his other hand towards the Khan.

For a moment, he hesitated. He was still looking at Magnus. Perhaps his famed pride had been dented, or perhaps he was merely weighing up how far he believed his brother's words.

In the end, though, he relented, and his own hands reached out to those of his allies.

'So long as you do, brother,' he warned, sealing the triangle.

'So you made progress?' asked Yesugei, with the sun setting in a fiery sky.

'Of a sort,' said the Khan. 'Work remains.'

'Will you stay here, then?'

'Until the Crusade calls again.'

'And Horus?'

The Khan looked pensive. 'I don't know. I still hope he can be a part of this.'

'His reputation has never been higher.'

'There's danger in that.'

Yesugei smiled. ‘You see danger everywhere, Khagan. You have achieved everything you set out to achieve – the survival of the ordu, the protection of the Test of Heaven. Now the last worlds topple, and we are on the edge of securing our honoured place within the Legions. Where is the danger? Where does it come from now?’

The primarch didn’t reply immediately.

‘I always knew,’ the Khan said eventually. ‘From the earliest days, before I understood anything but the Altak, I always knew where the threat lay, and how to counter it.’

He turned away from the sinking sun, hot even in its long decay.

‘But not now,’ he said pensively. ‘That is what worries me. For the first time, Targutai, I have no idea at all.’

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FIFTEEN

It was a world laid low and then made anew, a testament to the newly unfettered power of humanity, the high tidemark of its burgeoning power. The Emperor had become both creator and destroyer, the commander of an Imperium that could reshape the physical galaxy into whatever image it desired. The Legiones Astartes were his right hand of vengeance, the Mechanicum his left hand of restitution. Now the planets themselves were baubles, mere fragments of rock to be hewn afresh and recast. After the inferno, the last retreat of the ork warlord Urlakk Urg had been burned down to its core, excised of all remnants and made pure for a new age.

Yesugei did not even know what it had looked like before. Perhaps it had been a swamp world, infested with splashing columns of hain marching under thick vines, or a desert, or a teeming hive, or a ball of ice. He found himself looking for clues, kicking over the rubble to seek a sign of how things had been, but found nothing. Ullanor's gravel was lifeless now, a dust of almost inert semi-fused rock, ready for the terraformers to move in and begin the process of settlement. There were no clues left, nothing that would ever tell an observer that once an empire had been spawned here, one that had briefly risen up and challenged the growing domain of mankind.

Carthago delenda est.

How many humans would know what those words meant? How many Terrans, whose world had birthed them, and how many on the thousands of newly populated and rediscovered orbs, all frantically developing and building and reaching upwards to a dimly understood but fantastically powerful future? Just a handful, maybe, who had access to lost books written in dead languages. History had a penchant for repeating itself, though, for rehearsing old patterns in ever grander circuits even if the participants had forgotten their origins.

Yesugei walked further along the massif. Iron-black rocks were scattered away from him in every direction, a dry crust over life-crushed soil. It was hot, almost as hot as Baal had been, though he did not know whether this was from the munitions unleashed in the atmosphere, or because Ullanor had always been that way. The air was gritty and unpleasant, and the wind barely picked up from a faint stir that wafted against the exposed flesh of his face.

He had walked far after the great ceremony, wearied by its overblown triumphalism. The Khan had given him licence to stay away for a long time, and so he had taken the chance, exploring the crevices and peaks of the world, trying to divine what had made it such a totem for the orks before the end had come for them.

They had fought here longest and hardest, even more so than they had on their sentinel worlds. If Horus had not been there – if the *Warmaster* had not been there – it might have gone another way. They had to remember that now. Amid all the recriminations, bewilderment and envy, they had to remember that it had been the XVI Legion that had broken the enemy. Maybe another Legion could have done it, maybe not. It didn't matter now – the deed was completed, the announcement made, the balance of Legions turned upside down.

Even after a lifetime of service in the Crusade, he still did not know many warriors of the XVI. They had always struck him as a coarse and brutal people, overly proud of their martial record, unwilling to share glory and possessed of the obsessions of pre-eminence. They were hardly alone in that, but the tendency could only get worse now.

So Yesugei had avoided them, both during the Triumph and also in the aftermath. The only conversation of significance had come just before the great processions, when thousands of warriors mingled on the avenues under the shadows of Titans, pressed up against one another so that no avoidance was possible.

The warrior had had pale skin, dark hair, sunken eyes. His manner had been proud yet brittle, his eyes darting. Yesugei had sensed the power there, though heavily curtailed, bound under layers of control for a very long time, as if weight and vigilance had ever had purchase over such things.

'You are Yesugei,' the warrior had said, pushing his way in close.

Yesugei had nodded. They hadn't met before – he would have remembered – but something about him was dimly familiar.

‘Jereth,’ the warrior had said. ‘I am named Jereth. I spoke to one of your order. A very long time ago, I suppose.’

‘Is that so.’

‘I’ve thought about him often, in the years since.’ His steel-grey eyes had flickered. ‘The Librarius is everywhere now. His were prophetic words, and I do not forget them.’

In the distance, war-horns had blared. The skies had churned, the first stirrings before His own craft began their long descent.

Yesugei had not found an adequate reply. Courtesy had demanded he remain engaged, but he had found he had no wish to. Something about this Jereth had been unsettling.

‘You speak of Borghal?’ he had asked, gauging the name from the resonance around them.

Jereth had seemed not to register that. ‘Know this,’ he had said. ‘I came to believe he was right. I did nothing to sabotage his overtures. Truly. My master was already looking to the future. If things had been… different, he would have backed the project. He remained aloof. That was for other reasons.’

Yesugei had said nothing.

‘It failed at that world. At Gar-Ban-Gar. No one will ever know it, but it failed there. Once he saw what was on offer, he couldn’t be seen to take sides.’

‘All must take sides, in the end,’ Yesugei had said.

‘Not always.’ Jereth had looked up at the growing torment in the heavens. Dust storms were kicking up, driven by powerful thruster downdraughts. ‘Does he live? The Stormseer?’

‘No. Died in battle.’

Jereth had looked genuinely pained. ‘I had hoped to speak to him again.’

And then the skies had split open, riven by columns of flame. The crowds had surged forwards, separating the two of them, and no more words were said.

That had been days ago. After the last fervour of it all had died away, Yesugei left, treading paths that a year ago had been burning and echoing with screams, and were now nothing at all, a blank sheet of parchment, a fresh start.

He detected the tracer signal following him a long time before he did anything about it. He had not been alone, truly alone, for a very long time,

and he was in no hurry to change that. After a while, he began to be amused by its tenacity. He could walk a long way before becoming remotely fatigued, something even motorised transports struggled to match in that shattered landscape, and so the follower would surely give up soon.

But it kept coming. In the end, he chose to crest a particularly challenging scarp, and waited at the summit. He watched the crawler pick its way up the dry valley below, rocking on its axis and labouring on damaged tracks. The world's sunlight was already beginning to fade, smeared to grey in a toxin-rich atmosphere. So many explosives had been detonated in the planet's air that it would take decades of Mechanicum scrubbers to make it even vaguely safe to breathe.

The crawler came to a halt at the base of the cliff, and a slender figure got out. From the way the figure moved, Yesugei determined it was a woman, relatively old, in only moderate fitness and poorly equipped for the terrain. No doubt she was the one he had been informed about, the Terran whose enquiries had been more persistent than those who had come before. He might have picked his way down the slope then to intercept her, but decided to wait, to see how keen she really was for a meeting. He withdrew from the edge, turning away to look up at the scudding clouds, feeling the hot wind on his exposed neck.

He felt curiously dislocated then. The woman making her way up the steep clifftop suddenly became a source not of curiosity, but of doubt. He could hear her breathing from afar, hear the scratch of boots against scree.

He still could have walked away. She would not have been able to follow for long. He needed neither sustenance nor rest – she would last only a short while before having to turn back.

Yesugei felt his heart rate begin to pick up. For some reason, he wished to be elsewhere, another place, anywhere but there. The clouds were still racing overhead, the soils were still hot. His mouth became drier.

He had no future-sense. The Khan was right – that was a curse, a way for the gods to mock rather than bless. And yet, just then, a whole succession of strange images ran through his mind. He saw worlds burning – ones he recognised, ones he didn't. He heard a voice crying out his name, and somehow knew it was this woman's, though he had no idea why she was doing it.

He steadied himself. She had got herself in trouble. He could hear her losing her footing – if she slipped now, the fall would likely kill her, and

whatever purpose she had in coming here would go with her. The urge to leave her alone was powerful, like a weight on his limbs.

He hurried back up to the edge of the cliff, just in time to see her teeter on the brink, her hands missing their hold. He reached out, catching her by the wrist, and it felt as fragile as glass in his powerful grip.

‘General Ilya Ravallion, Departmento Munitorum,’ he said. ‘Be careful.’

She looked up at him. He could see her face through a transparent helm visor, caked in dirt and sweat and visibly shaken. She was too weak for that ascent, but something told him that she would not have given up, but would have fought her way to the summit against all common sense. He could sense the determination there, the mental toughness, as formidable as her body was weak.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I will.’

Five days passed. The fleet was making preparations to leave again. It was no trivial thing to arrange for the orderly departure of those behemoths of the void. Refuelling, reprovisioning, rearming – it all took time, and the labour of many thousands of menials. The matter was complicated by the presence of other Legions in-system, all of whom made their own demands on an overstretched Imperial administration.

No greater gathering of primarchs had ever taken place, and every one of the assembled brothers took the chance to converse with his sundered kin, knowing that the chance would not come again for a long time. Emperor’s Children warriors mingled with the Luna Wolves; Death Guard infantry exchanged terse words with World Eaters pit fighters. The White Scars, as ever, kept themselves away from the hot centre, preferring the void to Ullanor’s blasted plains.

Eventually, though, Yesugei returned to the surface, taking a lander down for the human woman, as he had promised. There were sound military reasons for that – she was a general, one whose long service had not dulled a certain native commitment to the cause, and the Khan’s desire to bring the White Scars more into the mainstream of the Imperial war effort would require allies. Some of those were drawn from his peers – the Angel, the magician of Prospero – others had to be taken from less lofty stock. Ravallion had, after all, asked for the audience.

As ever, the remaking of the Legion was a work in progress. It would never have an end, and even its beginning was already starting to be forgotten. It had become hard to tell the Terrans from the Chogorians, at

least amongst those who had served for any length of time. Perhaps they would never excise their weaknesses. The important thing, as Qin Xa was fond of observing, was to make the attempt.

Yesugei did not speak much to the woman on the orbital ascent. She was nervous, almost cripplingly so, but there was little other than platitudes that could be said. A Space Marine was an exalted creature; a primarch so much more so. That such creations were necessary was a marker of just how hostile the galaxy truly was – better that the masses never knew too much about them, and merely gazed up in awe from a distance.

But he had sympathy for her, for all that. She looked frail, like the almost forgotten bird on the far side of that barely remembered Terran pane of glass, and there was only so much a determined mental attitude could compensate for.

‘Try to understand him,’ he said calmly. ‘He may even like you. I have seen stranger things.’

They docked soon afterwards, weaving through the clusters of void-craft drifting around the *Swordstorm*. From there it was a long walk to the Khan’s chambers, during which her agitation only grew. In the end, she did well enough – looking him in the eye, answering his questions honestly and without bluster. Yesugei watched her the whole time, ready to step in if the transhuman dread became too much.

It was unfortunate, perhaps, that the Warmaster chose that moment to make his long-promised appearance.

Horus was a bruising, dominating presence, even for Yesugei. It was hard to know how much that had always been the case, or whether the Triumph had altered him somehow. Now, the four of them were thrown together – Warmaster, primarch, Stormseer, human – as if in some kind of descending allegory of psychic evolution.

‘My brother,’ said the Khan, getting up to greet him.

‘Jaghatai,’ said Horus.

There was already an inequality between them. Before they had been nominal equals, part of an order without formal rank, albeit with a constant churn of rivalries and internal standings. Now the hierarchy had been made concrete – the Emperor had gone back to the Throneworld, and his favoured son had been appointed master of the Crusade.

That changed everything. Yesugei could see it. Perhaps even Ravallion could sense it. Horus seemed to have grown in stature, although he still

exuded that old and easy charisma. The change was enough to make the exchanges stilted and awkward.

‘We should fight together again, you and I,’ Horus said to the Khan. ‘It has been too long, and I miss your presence. Things are uncomplicated with you. I wish you would not hide yourself away.’

It sounded like a compliment. Perhaps it was. Yesugei knew his master well enough, though, to notice the faint resistance there, the merest whisper of detachment.

‘I can usually be found,’ said the Khan. ‘In the end.’

It was not a long encounter. Horus had places he needed to be, and the Khan was already restless for onward movement. They discussed deployment to Chondax, but in a curiously impersonal way, as if it were merely the afterthought of a completed task rather than the next stage in a Crusade that was not yet over.

Yesugei said nothing. Ravallion said nothing. The Khan and Lupercal spoke on, perhaps too freely, as if they were acting out the part of brothers now, having forgotten what it was to truly be in the role.

‘The galaxy is changing,’ said the Warmaster, amiably enough. ‘There is much I do not understand about it, and much I do not like. Warriors should remain close. I hope that I can call on you, if the time comes.’

For a moment, Yesugei wondered what the response would be. No one else, perhaps not even the Emperor Himself, would have spoken to the Khan in that way.

‘You know you can, brother,’ said the Khan. ‘That is always how it has been between us. You call, I answer.’

And that was it. That was the substance of it. No formal treaties, no arrangements for rendezvous within a specific time frame. No doubt the details could be ironed out later, but even so, it was a paltry basis on which to proceed.

Yesugei and the Khan left the chamber after that, escorting Horus back to his shuttlecraft from where he would go on to command the entire network of expeditionary fleets. On the way down to the hangar level, the Khan caught Yesugei’s eye, and for a moment a wariness could be glimpsed there. The two primarchs embraced formally, exchanged further promises to campaign together, and then the Warmaster stalked up the long ramp and inside the intra-fleet shuttle.

Once the lander had boosted up, swivelled around and pushed down the length of the long hangar, the White Scars primarch turned to his counsellor. Yesugei looked back.

‘What do you make of that?’ Yesugei asked.

‘He came to warn me,’ the Khan said. ‘That, at least, was good of him.’

‘Even now, they try to destroy what has been created.’

‘He remained neutral for too long. Now he has to remain so. Of all my failures, that may be the greatest.’

‘He knew what he wanted,’ Yesugei said. ‘He knew it from the start.’

The Khan smiled grimly. ‘Prepared for the challenge, though, zadyin arga? I have another world in mind for you now.’

‘Baal was disagreeable.’

‘This one is barely habitable.’

‘I begin to wonder if you select them deliberately.’

The Khan started to walk. ‘They see us as no more than ork hunters. We did that job too well for them, and now they give us nothing else. I cannot refuse Chondax, but someone must represent us at the conclave. We always knew it would come, and I would have wished you to be there anyway – you are the most eloquent of us all.’

‘Not in Gothic.’

‘Then you must work harder. We all must.’ They entered the glistening corridors, thick with decoration. ‘This is all we have left now. Horus cannot be an ally, for he is no longer an equal. What is a Warmaster but another Malcador? And what is Malcador but the voice of his master?’

‘Then we will hunt on our own.’

‘It’ll take us away from the scheming.’ The Khan’s lips curled in distaste. ‘My brothers are already jockeying. Some are jealous. Some see their chance now.’

‘And you, Khagan?’

‘I want no part of it. It sickens me.’ He halted at twin golden doors, each marked by fine calligraphy. ‘That woman. She has a fierce soul. You think she’s strong enough?’

Yesugei thought back to her expression at the clifftop. ‘Undoubtedly.’

‘Make her an offer, then – whatever she wants. We need to be more self-sufficient, and for that we’ll need help.’

‘By your command.’

The Khan reached out, tracing the line of the glyph on the left hand of the doorway. The Khitan figure *Xianoa* glistered under the lumens. It denoted warning and foreboding, but also misplaced caution. The glyph was inscribed at the beginning of journeys as both a guard against pride and an injunction against faint-heartedness. Many of the fleet's starships had it beaten into the prow in gold-chased adamantium, the first thing an enemy would see before the lances ignited.

'I should never have engaged,' the primarch said, half to himself, half to Yesugei. 'I never believed in Unity from the start, but now even my Father has given up the pretence. What were we fighting for, for so long, to merely become the xenos hunters of another general?'

'You told him you would answer.'

The Khan looked at his counsellor. 'We'll be on Chondax for a long time. We may never come back.'

Yesugei smiled. 'Eternity is a long way off.'

The Khan snorted a laugh. 'You should find the general again before she runs away. She's of the Imperium – if we aren't going to be a part of it, we can still learn from it. After that, the conclave on Nikaea – that's the last strand of this I care about, and when it's settled we'll forge our own path, just as we always did.'

'You do not mean that,' Yesugei said. 'You are Terran-born, Khagan. One day that world will call you back.'

'So what if it does?' said the Khan, passing under the archway, leaving the sigil behind. 'I care nothing for it.'

'I do not believe you,' Yesugei said, calling after him.

The Khan continued walking.

'You are too indulgent towards them,' he said. 'Learn to let them go.'

From Ullanor the fleet pushed hard spinwards, pulling all resources out-system and into the deep void. It was met three days later by the secondary attack group, long engaged in conjunction with the Luna Wolves during the final phases of the push towards ork-held fortress asteroids, but now freed up for new tasking.

Three weeks after that came another rendezvous, this time a long way into scarcely charted space – seven line battleships fresh from a long-planned assault against a different xenos species, the mjordhainn. More than sixteen had been expected at that nexus, but the Khan could not wait for all of them to muster, and so the fleet pressed on, picking up momentum.

Others would have to follow when the tidings reached them, whenever that was.

There were more points of meeting as the long-scattered segments of the White Scars Legion came together again, dragged into a great conglomeration, ship after ship, brotherhood after brotherhood. There had never been a gathering of such size, and in its wake they left only a network of scattered garrisons and contingents running too far beyond comms range to be hastily recalled. The Legion was pulling its full strength together, and over the years that strength had grown indeed.

Once mustered, the navigators held conclave and set the coordinates, settling down into the trances that would guide them through the substrate of dreams. The warp engines ignited, thrumming down long energy conduits created on Mars decades – even centuries – ago and sending the knife-prowed battleships hurtling towards their destination.

Transit was prolonged, hampered by a steady turbulence in the warp. Naranbaatar said it was as if something vast were turning uneasily in its sleep, and it made progress dangerous. In the interim, the brotherhoods trained and re-equipped, restoring their physical condition and putting both weapons and armour through the forges. Squads that had never before heard of one another were thrown together into new attack groups, organised under the auspices of the general taken so recently from the Imperium's Departmento Munitorum. Some were Chogorian, some Terran, some a mixture of both, and hasty work was done to consolidate the various divergent command doctrines that had emerged over a hundred and twenty years of continuous operations. It would not be enough, and there was never enough time, and no doubt things were missed or looked over, but it was a start.

Eventually, the fleet slid back through the veil on the edge of its destination: the sprawling Chondax system, a scatter of many dozen worlds thrown out in a long thick-starred arc spreading from the Paraban Deeps out towards the extreme fringes of the Alaxxes meta-quadrant. The *Swordstorm* was first, as ever, swimming up from the abyss with its bridge levels shimmering in aether residue. Then came the *Tchin-Zar*, the *Lance of Heaven*, and the rest, one after the other, the great starships gliding in formation out from the netherworld and into the visible.

The Khan watched the formation take shape, an elegant void dance that showed off his warriors' shipmastery to good effect, and the first twitch of a

smile flickered across his tense-held lips. He stood up, leaving the command throne and walking to the rim of the terrace that overlooked his many-tiered bridge. Hundreds of menials, servitors and naval staff worked in the pits below, some on suspended platforms, others attending to the vast semi-circular banks of sensor nodes and cogitator clusters. Warriors from his keshig stood sentinel amid the echoing spaces, their glaives held rigid like the halberds of ancient Qo fortress guardians.

Ahead of them, heavy shutters pulled back, revealing an armourglass aperture with a dazzling view of the pure void ahead. Stars glinted in a vivid band of silver against black, a tiny fragment of the galactic arm that still remained for conquest, the undiscovered country now marked off for them alone.

‘Status, general,’ the Khan said.

Ravallion looked up from her station. She had not quite lost the air of half fear, half exasperation that had been with her since her appointment, but she was getting better at hiding it.

‘Anomalous readings from all ships,’ she reported, her brow furrowing. ‘I’m having problems with the comms. Astropaths reporting significant difficulties.’ She looked up towards him. ‘Unless this clears up, we’ll have trouble restoring contact with the Imperium.’

The Khan nodded. ‘Excellent.’

From further down in the bridge depths came the telltale hiss and crackle of teleportation energies. Moments later, two warriors clad in Terminator battleplate lumbered up to the command level, each bearing the markings of noyan-khan, their ivory war-plate decked in the tribal insignias of their respective Hordes.

The first was Jemulan, Giyahun’s replacement; the second was Hasik. Both bowed before the primarch, then turned to face the star field ahead.

Finally, as the last of the real-space protocols were completed and the warning chimes faded away, Qin Xa emerged to join them, and the quartet lined up along the great balcony overlooking the bridge terraces.

For a while, no one said anything. The worlds they had come for were out there, still a long way from visible range, but nestled within that cascade of light and dark. The names were known to all of them: Gamanio, Phemus, Jion, Epihelikon, Chondax. Those were prey-names now, markers for a waning species destined to die at their hand. Just as it had been at Hoadh, at Ullanor, at a hundred other sites across the growing Imperium, the

anticipation of the hunt coursed like static electricity across every bridge of every ship in the fleet.

The Khan placed his gauntlets on the railing.

‘Prepared, noyan-khan?’ he asked Jemulan.

‘Absolutely, Khagan,’ he replied.

‘And you, Hasik? Last to the muster again?’

‘I slay faster when in a hurry.’

Qin Xa smiled. For all his unmatchable calmness, even he was poised for the plunge now, just as they all were. Down below in the hangars, drop pods and gunships were already being lifted into position, ready for the deadly cargo that marched towards them through the muster halls.

‘Far from reach now,’ the Khan said. ‘I didn’t realise how much I missed it.’

The deck trembled underfoot as machinery shifted and slotted into place. Orbital weaponry was being prepared by the deck gangs, and the plasma drives were keying up to full efficiency.

‘We never needed anyone but ourselves.’

The sensorium began to calibrate the first ingress runs. Gamanio was first, a world they said was crawling with hain so thickly that the ground was barely visible. Then the others would follow, in ordered procession, ending with Chondax itself, a mini Ullanor and the last known stronghold of xenos in the segmentum.

‘They’ll come back for us, Khagan,’ said Qin Xa. ‘One day.’

The Khan nodded.

‘That they will,’ he said, gaze fixed on the void ahead. ‘But not this day.’

The first augur soundings returned, pinpointing the target world and giving readings for the gravity well. The run-in sequence would commence within moments, and after that the old cycle would begin again, the one rehearsed for a lifetime on the plains and now elevated to the total war of the heavens.

They had always been star hunters.

‘On this day, brothers,’ the Khan said, ‘we show them the storm.’

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the Primarchs novel *Leman Russ: The Great Wolf*, the novellas *Brotherhood of the Storm* and *Wolf King*, and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Vaults of Terra: The Carrion Throne*, *Watchers of the Throne: The Emperor's Legion*, the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris* as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *War of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Warhammer Chronicles novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

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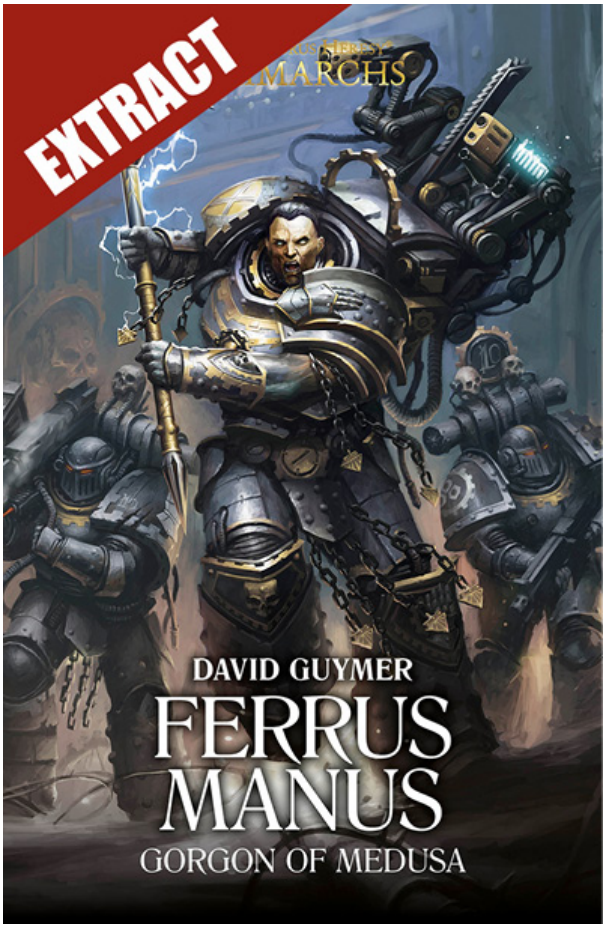
An extract from *Ferrus Manus: Gorgon of Medusa*.



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Amadeus DuCaine thumped shoulder-first into the rockcrete wall. He dropped to one knee, turned his back, calmly ejected the spent magazine from his bolter and snapped home another of the specially tagged sickle-mags. As he did so he noticed the las-burn on his vambrace, cursed aloud, and took a moment to buff it out using the wrist of the opposite gauntlet. He'd been taught to go into battle looking as he'd want the Apothecaries to find him. Today was no different.

The thick harness of his Mk I Thunder Armour was so polished a black that it shone under the inconstant light and creeping ice like volcanic glass, covered in company and campaign citations, most of which the Legion no longer officially recognised. Of them all, his pride was the Seal of the Eye of Vigilance, etched in platinum into the cheek guard of his tall helm. He had earned it in the latter years of the Seraphina offensive, campaigning alongside Lord Horus after the X Legion's annihilation of the ork forces on Rust. Good years. A curtain of chainmail, alternating rings of black iron and silver, hung from his shoulder guards. A collar of iron spikes traced the rear of his gorget ring and rose behind the back of his head. He carried a Clan Sorrgol banner as a cloak. It was heavy velvet, reinforced with a metal weave, weighted with onyx, black spinel and star sapphire, and glazed with ice. The clan device was picked out in silver.

With a series of heavy thumps, his command squad joined him in cover. Techmarine Rab Tannen. Apothecary Aled Glassius. Half a dozen age-raw, hoarfrosted, brutally decorated veterans almost as hard-bitten as their Lord Commander. Storm Walkers all and proud of it. The boy, Caphen, was last.

The lacquered purple of the youngster's armour was scuffed and bullet-grazed, the palatine aquila that stood proud of his chest plastron burnished with coppery hygroscopic ice. Breathless sounds emerged from his helm augmitter as he crashed into the wall at the far end of the line.

'They coming?' DuCaine asked, and checked his vambrace for damage under the passing alchemical light of an aerial flare.

Caphen nodded. 'They're coming.'

The boy had been attached to the command squad strictly as an observer, but the old hands all looked at him as they would a stressed bulkhead,

something that might give at any second and void the entire proverbial section.

‘The lad’s one of us now,’ said DuCaine, raising his voice to contend with the shrieking fire of the Tarantula batteries dug in on the other side of the wall. ‘That’s the last I want to say on it.’

The lad nodded his thanks. Even if he did flinch at being called ‘lad’, ‘boy’, or any variation thereof.

Satisfied, DuCaine looked up, as if he could discern the progress of the battle from the flicker trace of fire and dying flares. Vesta was a sunless moonlet, adrift in the void, cast off by its parent system at some point or other over the last five billion years under circumstances that didn’t interest him, and dark as hell. It was cold enough to flash-kill a primarch. Until a few days ago, it hadn’t had a name. That was why the enemy had chosen it.

Who would miss an orphan moon that no Imperial cartographer had yet bothered to stick a number to?

He turned away to see that Gaius Caphen had worked his way up the line towards him.

‘I am uncertain about this tactic, Lord Commander.’

DuCaine laughed. An inbred respect for the proper chain of command and an innate disapproval of so single-minded an approach to warfare were clearly tying the boy’s head in knots.

‘This tactic is a classic. Did I not tell you of the time that Lord Horus assigned his own First Captain as my equerry after Rust, to see it first-hand?’

‘I think you may have,’ muttered Tannen.

The Techmarine had been amongst the last cohort to learn his craft in the Ural forges. He was among the last to have retained a Terran sense of humour. DuCaine threw him an ironic ‘thank you’ wave.

‘It won’t work against the Emperor’s Children,’ said Caphen.

That single statement soured the mood more than all the artillery of the III Legion ever could.

DuCaine had been trying not to think about it.

But if the lad had any qualms about facing his own brothers in battle, then he wasn’t showing it. DuCaine was impressed. Even if it had been Fulgrim himself who had given the boy his orders. The rest of the command squad picked up on his resolve; their attitudes of suspicion noticeably relaxed.

‘The warlord clans of old Albia have been perfecting this way of war on each other for hundreds of years,’ DuCaine explained. ‘The trick of it is to deploy only the *exact* amount of strength you need to draw your enemy into a straight fight.’

‘And in ensuring the men so deployed have the nerve to stand before the storm,’ said Glassius, in characteristically portentous language. The Apothecary liked to project an air of gravitas onto the suckling neophytes he had to call brother. ‘And in increasing numbers, sir.’

DuCaine nodded in agreement. He’d become aware of the custom that had developed amongst the mortal auxilia of the 52nd Expedition, of scribing their own condolence letters prior to deployment. DuCaine heartily approved.

The clans of old Albia had observed similar traditions.

‘This phase is called Raising the Storm. It’s a template we followed on the Central Afrik, and in the Panpacific Campaigns.’

Caphen’s look, even through the frosted amethyst of his helmet lenses, was one that DuCaine had come to recognise all too well over the last century and a half. It wondered just how hard Unification could have been. How it could possibly have taken the Master of Mankind and his twenty Legions so long to achieve.

‘You heard of Rust?’

‘I think he may have,’ said Tannen.

‘It won’t work,’ Caphen repeated. ‘The Third Legion don’t fight in that way.’

‘I know the boy we’re fighting here well, and he’s not nearly as good as he thinks he is. In my experience a battle can be controlled right up to the point where it begins. After that I don’t care if you’re a technobarbarian from the Afrik, an ork, or aye, even Legiones Astartes, you do what everyone does in a battle.’

Caphen shook his head, but did not protest further.

DuCaine shrugged, turned back to the wall, slung his bolter strap over his shoulder, then set his boot against the frozen rockcrete surface as if about to pull himself up over the top.

‘We just have to sweeten the lure a little bit.’

Moses Trurakk pulled the control stick hard to the left, intending to jink but instead dragging the hyper-responsive Xiphon Interceptor into a hard break to port. He cursed in consonant-heavy Medusan as snap shots scorched his

canopy and clipped the roll of his starboard wing. G-force crushed him into his flight harness as the unfamiliar machine dumped forward momentum into the turn. Pushing his engineered biology to the limits of its tolerance, he levered himself up from his harness and craned forward, catching sight of the heavily armed wedge of black as the enemy aircraft overshot.

‘Didn’t see that coming,’ he muttered sarcastically.

Conjuring mental formulaics of encouragement and common purpose, he directed them towards the Xiphon’s rebellious spirit via the interface shunt plugged into his upper spine. He dragged his augmented left hand from the dashboard to grapple the stick two-handed, the interceptor’s wing flaps juddering violently as it began to level out. A groan forced its way through his teeth. It felt like he was lifting the aircraft by hand. ‘You’re sensitive enough when you want to be.’ Just as he felt the wobble along his midline that told him he was about to pitch into another roll in the opposite direction, he pushed his hand through a hard gauntlet of gees to open up the throttle. At the same time his boot eased off the rudder pedal and the interceptor slammed him back into his harness and shot into a climb, scissoring over and under the enemy strike fighter as each sought to get in behind the other.

Unable to break the stalemate after half a dozen turns, the more powerful Primaris-Lightning broke off with a massive burn of thrust.

Moses had no option but to let it go.

The Xiphon was a ludicrously high-performance machine. It boasted phenomenal corner speeds, touch-responsiveness, and was as agile in atmosphere as it was in the void. But for all its aeronautical capabilities it hadn’t a scratch on a Primaris-Lightning for raw manoeuvring power.

He took advantage of the temporary lull to silence a string of alarms demanding his attention, and to correct a potentially serious fuel imbalance in his starboard nacelle.

The Xiphon was too complicated for its own good. It was lightweight and underpowered, and the design compromises inherent in a propulsion system that could operate in a range of atmosphere types, even one as inhospitable as Vesta’s, or in a vacuum, made her a nuisance of micromanagement in a fight.

He didn’t even like the colour.

‘*You need a lighter touch on the ailerons,*’ said Ortan Vertanus. Moses scanned the coppery belts of cloud that strangled his aircraft, but saw no

sign of his wing-brother. ‘*And not so belligerent with the stick. She wants to fly, brother. Let her.*’

‘I have a solid grounding in all Imperial aeronautica.’

‘*But do you love her, brother?*’

‘My feelings are inconsequential. And my aircraft is agendered.’

‘*I know that you talk to her when you’re alone in there*.’

‘I assure you I do not.’

Light laughter crackled through the augmitter pad in Moses’ control board.

‘*I believe it was the Shakespire that said – my brother doth protest too much. Combat is more than numbers and angles. It is a joust*.’

A shudder passed through Moses’ canopy armourglass as Vertanus’ purple Xiphon roared overhead. Its wings were anhedral with a downward-cranked tip, like a Felgarrthi vulture tucking in its pinions to swoop on rotting meat. Its two stripped-down engines frothed the thick clouds with white, its pilot making expert use of Vesta’s gravity to fire the aircraft across Moses’ nose and into an overshoot.

‘Show off,’ Moses muttered.

‘*Are you even trying, Iron Hand?*’ voxed Paliolinus, wing commander. ‘*I was told that you had more confirmed kills than any combat pilot in Clan Vurgaan*.’

‘You were informed correctly,’ Moses replied tersely. The joint exercises between the III and X Legions had been Lord Manus’ proposal, to challenge ingrained approaches and provoke competitive spirit across both sides. Legion honour mattered. But clan honour mattered more, and personal honour more again.

He would rely on any man of the Iron Tenth to say the same.

‘Give me time,’ he said. And an aircraft that does not handle like a parchment aeroplane, he wished to add but did not. A gifted artificer did not impugn his implements.

‘*I apologise if I sound harsh*,’ said Paliolinus, sensing his defensiveness. ‘*I do not know if I could perform to my fullest in your place*.’

‘You have not seen my fullest. But you will. I will not fail my primarch.’

‘*Well said, brother*.’

A string of icons, symbols and unit-level organisational motifs flowed from the wing-commander’s flight cogitator through to the marker

recognition algorithms of Moses' ventral auspex. He scowled at the implication that he might need a reminder.

'*The immediate airspace is presently clear*,' said Paliolinus. '*We proceed as parameterised*.'

Affirmatives clicked through the squadron vox. Moses cut his thrust. Gravity would soon be enough to prevent an engine stall. He angled the flaps in his tailplane to turn his nose into the clouds. A fuel alarm pinged across his neural shunt. He tapped the brass trim of the fuel gauge, but otherwise ignored it. The Xiphon was a short-range interceptor and reduced fuel capacity kept it light. The levels remained within the III Legion's expected parameters, despite the dogfight.

'Six, ready,' Moses confirmed.

'*Descent speed*,' voxed Paliolinus.

The early Catherics of DuCaine's homeland had thought hell a frozen wasteland of eternal winter. It was only later iterations of the superstition that had filled it with flames, and it was the earlier interpretation of mankind's primordial dread that hit DuCaine as he hauled himself onto the thick rockcrete-block wall.

The X Legion had dug in in the basin of an extinct caldera, part of a range of mountains composed of frozen ethane that circled the southern lunar pole, near to where the warriors of the Emperor's Children were believed to have established a base of operations.

Heaving bodies of men and machines surged down the rust-coloured, semi-transparent slopes. Over a certain distance, in the dark, in the sublimation of hydrocarbon ice to phantasmal gases, man and machine became largely indistinguishable, blobs of drab metal and void-armoured flesh, imbued by aerial flares with the colours of blood and fire. The condemned wail of the Tarantula positions was the sound to which the harrowing was played out, their screams overloading even the fine discrimination of Space Marine hearing. Denuded of that sensation, he could only *feel* the stride of the Legio Decimare as the Titans walked towards his lines. Like the beasts of Hellenic legend from which they drew their name, marching to war on the gods that had made them.

A steel plate covered the wound in the right side of DuCaine's face, but with his remaining eye he took in the state of the X Legion forces.

To his right, an aegis defence line was engaged in a blistering fire duel with a bloc of Plutonic Janissars in high-spec ice-world combat gear. To the

left, a column of main-line fighting vehicles, including the precursor-pattern Sicaran battle tank *Beast of Manus*, crumbled before the weight of enemy Leman Russ Conquerors. Immediately in front of him, across the iced-up sentry lines, a horrendously outclassed formation of the Afrik Demi-Mechanised held their lines against waves of encroachment by III Legion breacher squads.

‘They’re coming, all right.’

He lifted his cloak in one hand to display the glittering device of Clan Sorrgol for all to see, just as a barrage of sonic claps took their shot at his punished eardrums and drew his gaze upwards. An arrowhead of Xiphon Interceptors flashed across his vantage, causing his cloak to balloon up around his fist, and gunned through a loose hail of flak towards the steaming crags that encircled their position.

The Emperor’s Children were about to learn the cost of challenging the Iron Hands in battle.

The storm had been raised.

It was time to bring down the hammer.

The drop pod’s hatches blew out on impact, shattering the steeply inclined ice like docking claw and assault ramp crowbarred into one utilitarian lump of metal. Entry heat steamed off the pod’s thermal shielding, anointing the Avernii Clan veterans of the First Order within with a noxious libation of aerosolised copper and gaseous hydrocarbons.

Gabriel Santar broke through the murk, down the ramp and out onto the rapidly sublimating permafrost of Vesta.

Melt vapour enveloped him. The ground beneath his armoured boots literally boiled with the infinitesimal heat that escaped their seals. His helmet display struggled to declutter, shedding icons, redrawing the concealed topography from augur inloads. All the while, irresistible forward momentum drove him down the slope towards the sounds of combat. The primarch had seen fit to honour Order Primus with the first century of prototype Cataphractii battle suits. ‘We’re living in a golden age,’ Harik Morn had said, a wetness in his eye, as he broke open the consignment from Mars. Santar clenched one immense, crackling glove, atmosphere steaming from his grip.

It felt like he was wearing a Land Raider.

The removal and rationalisation of squad and hazard icons left two sets of runes that his authorisations could not touch. The first were the mission

imperatives uploaded and installed by the primarch himself. The second was the commencement order from Lord Commander DuCaine: codephrase ‘hammer’.

Typically unimaginative.

DuCaine was the last of the Terran old guard to occupy a position of high command. From the first days, the primarch had chosen to promote from his own, but DuCaine simply refused to die. Santar thought the Lord Commander a relic better suited to a position on the Clan Council lecturing neophytes on ancient histories. DuCaine thought Santar an over-promoted pup with a voice too close to the primarch’s ear. Mutual antagonism made them both better warriors.

‘Terminators front and centre,’ he voxed. ‘Breacher units to flank. Tactical squads, at a distance, overwatching the advance. Continual auspex sweeps for enemy rearguards.’

This face of the caldera had a relatively shallow grade with an aspect that shaded it from the meagre warmth of the most proximate stars. That was enough to give it the thickest and most stable ice layer in the vicinity, and so the bulk of DuCaine’s ‘hammer’ had been deployed here. Santar’s visor display continued to update and apprise on the smaller troop and armour drops that had been deposited around the caldera basin in an encirclement position, even if he did not wish to see it. He was fiddling with the complexity of the rune display when the murmur of distant combat was broken by the *crack* of a solitary shot.

For the count of about three seconds, the Terminators continued to plod forwards as if nothing had happened. Then the Order auspex trooper, Joraan, marked out from his brethren by the twanging sensor pole, dropped with a helmet splattered with red. *Damn*. A count of about three seconds more and the Terminators were still grinding downhill. They were too bulky to stop. *Damn!*

Bolter-fire echoed from the ice ridge above the drop pods, and suddenly Santar’s carefully ordered rune display was awash with auspex hits.

The more mobile tactical and breacher squads turned to face the threat and were methodically picked off, all while Santar and a hundred of the X Legion’s best stomped and slipped down the slope.

‘Back,’ he bellowed, into the vox and through his voice augmitter grilles. ‘Back up to the drop pods. We’ll use their cover to make a stand.’ His armour’s mission imperatives registered non-penetrating hits to back and

arm. Trembling with fury, he aimed behind him and shredded the melt fog with fire from his combi-bolter.

Defeat he could bear. Humiliation he refused to tolerate.

The ground beneath his feet hissed and bubbled, fissuring beneath his weight and spewing boiling ethane over his boots as he finally managed to arrest his forward charge.

The high-powered whine of at least twenty cold-stressed suspensor/repulsor drives drew Santar's ire before he could give it a target of his own choosing. A squadron of jetbikes pierced the ice haze like throwing knives. Their purple cowlings were decorated with chipped ice and stylised equidae, the brilliant palatine aquila on their front fairings proudly displayed in gold. Two Cataphractii were gunned down in the process of turning towards the initial ambush, the jetbikes naught but the rumour of engine noise, before Santar and the remainder of his warriors could bring their heavier guns to bear.

'I thought that you were the heroes in this conflict, *brother*!' Santar spat after them. He scanned the melt vapours with his full suite of instruments, but could still detect nothing but ghosts and static echoes. He cursed the loss of his auspex trooper. 'What manner of hero fights with such cowardice?'

'The one that wins, captain.' The disembodied reply came from the mist. 'The one that always wins.'

Another blizzard of gunfire dropped a handful of his Terminators, but for the most part the new-pattern armour held up to the punishment, the warriors adopting a defensive ring with red paint splattered all over their ebon war-plate.

As the echoes of the volley faded, the III Legion crystallised from the mist to take its place.

Their war-plate was highly elaborate, gilded with ebru and hagiography, their softseals cloaked with fine silks that rippled under the gentlest motion. They wore long red cloaks buckled with elaborate clasps, and came armed with a variety of melee weapons, many with one in each hand. To Santar's chagrin he saw that there were Iron Hands amongst their number. He saw Veneratii Urien, built like a bull grox, an enormous power-axe in each chain-wrapped fist. And there, Harik Morn, charging at his former brethren with a chainsword held in a two-handed butcher's grip. Santar emptied a

full magazine into Morn’s plastron as the mingled-blade brotherhood of the III Legion slammed into a wall of iron plate.

Or rather, it didn’t. It hit the wall the way a fog would. Swordsmen ducked under blows, around guards, slipped through gaps to assail their larger and more ponderous adversaries from all sides. Urien and Morn were the best warriors in the clan, and Santar had little doubt that the bladesmen attacking him now were drawn from the finest of the III Legion’s Second Company.

There was some satisfaction at the fact that they had come for him rather than for DuCaine.

‘You are dead, captain.’

Santar turned his head towards the voice, the awesome bulk of his armour following a second after.

Captain Akurduana’s armour was more gold than purple, the fine etching of his signature tughra flowing around the left side of the chest plastron and down his arm. The palatine aquila spread across the width of his chest-plate looked bright enough to take wing. A horsehair plume trailed from his helmet, red cloak fluttering as the bolters on the crags took shots at anything that came within six metres of their captain. Except for Santar. Akurduana clearly wanted him for himself. The captain bore two long swords, but had only seen fit to draw one. The other remained as pure statement, unrequired, sheathed in yellow silk at his hip. Rumour had it he was good, best in the Legion.

Santar wasn’t in his Legion.

‘Not yet, I’m not.’

‘You’re splitting hairs.’ Akurduana shrugged and leapt into the attack.

Santar took a step back, but his armour was too cumbersome, too slow, and he instead let it take the blade across the chest plating before lashing out with his lightning claw. With a weapon like that he only needed to hit his enemy once. The air burned as the energised gauntlet passed through it, but Akurduana evaded as though Santar’s intent had been inscribed on the face of his helmet. A dragged sidestep, a pivot, and then a strike so glancing it was almost casual, and Santar’s gauntlet smashed into the permafrost.

A geyser of fast-thawed ethane magma smote his faceplate, bent his neck hard back against his gorget bundles, and punched him onto his back.

He gave an impotent howl as the sublimation of the ground from under him stymied his attempt to rise. With what sounded like a sigh, Akurduana

brought his blade to Santar's throat seals.

Up close Santar could appreciate the craftsmanship. One warrior to another. As fine as anything made by the hands of Ferrus Manus.

He had a moment to think of something biting to utter in defeat before the primarch's mission imperatives blinked in his display, expanding to flush his visor with red light and his non-critical armour systems with disabling code. He saw Harik Morn stagger towards him, cradling a section of plastron that had been pummelled so hard with noospherically active red pigment that the plate had actually been breached.

'Damn, brother. You're taking this seriously.'

Santar could only admire Ferrus Manus' foresight. Without the disablement protocols he would have torn Akurduana's head off about now. Exercise or no exercise.

'I'm sorry, captain,' said Akurduana, and appeared to mean it. 'But this time you really are dead.'

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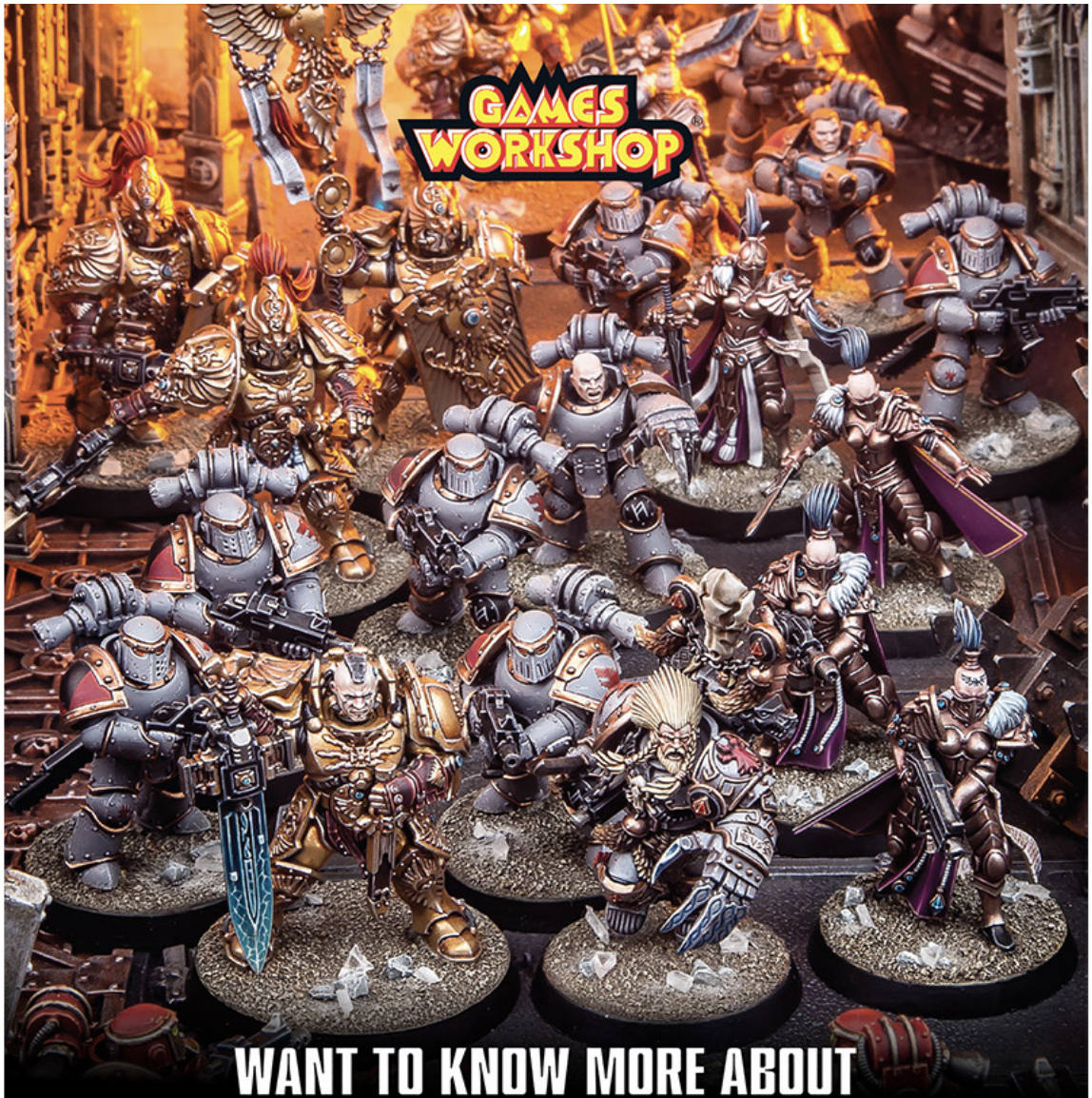

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To Hannah, with love.

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